

Life on Mars by littlepessimist

Category: IT (2017), IT - Stephen King, Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: 16-17 years old, ??? sort of???, Abuse, Aged-Up Character(s), Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Character Study, Child Abuse, Coming Out, I just felt like writing, Letters, M/M, My First Fanfic, Swearing, They suck, and since, basically richie's parents, but mike and nancy are the same age they are in the show, eeeerr what else, i have no idea how it will end, i just wanted the losers to be like, idk - Freeform, idk i'll add more tags when i can think of them, just let me have this, none of that forgetting nonsense, or at least first published, there is this lovely platform called ao3, why not share

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Karen Wheeler, Mike Hanlon, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Richie Tozier, Richie Tozier's Parents, Stanley Uris, Will Byers

Relationships: Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Eleven/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

Richie's life is upturned when he is finally sent away from his abusive home to live with his aunt and cousins in Hawkins, Indiana.

1. Chapter One: It's a god awful small affair

Author's Note:

There are some serious depictions of physical abuse in this chapter, so if that's triggering or just not your cup of tea, you may want to skip this.

This is my first little fanfic i've put here so I am nervous but excited! I will try to update regularly, but I am a full time student with a full time job sooooo that may not happen. I'll aim for a chapter a week, though.

He saw the first punch coming. Knew that his last stupid comment would be the one. The one that set his father off and turned the flame he'd been building into an inferno. He knew it was coming and couldn't stop his mouth from spilling over. Mouth kept running. Words still falling. And he saw his father's fists clench and his brows furrow and he knew it was coming.

Richie saw the first punch. He didn't see the next.

The first fist connected with his cheek, and the second hit his stomach. Richie's legs gave out, and in a moment his father slammed his heel into the back of his head, smashing Richie's face into the ground, the crunch of his glasses bouncing off the walls as it shattered against his skin. Richie could barely groan before another kick hit its mark on his ribs and pushed the air out of his lungs. His father repeated the action again and again and Richie tried to turn toward the wall in retreat, but the motion was immediately detected and his father snatched his arm, wrenching him away and leaving his body open. Defenseless. Another kick, a punch. Split lip. Pounding head. Aching ribs. Each swing of his father's leg—each released punch turning his pale freckled skin spotted and bloodied. But the motions were slowing, the fury subsiding, and Richie saw a small hesitation in his father's swing.

And as quick as his broken body let him, he ran.

Richie ran from his father, pushing him into the couch where his mother was passed out. She made a small grunt and shoved his father away with two hands. His father was quickly standing back up, his breaths ragged with rage, but Richie was already turning to door knob and swinging the door wide. He raced outside, gasping for air with each step. *Get to Bill*, he thought. *No—fuck he's visiting his aunt.* Richie stumbled down the porch. *Can't let Eds see me like this and he's too far—Stan. His dad will let me in if I promise not to bleed on the rug again. Get to Stan.* With a limping run, Richie ran onto the gravel walkway, the pebbles piercing his bare feet with each step. *Get to Stan then call Eds. Stan then Eddie*, he repeated. But then there was a shove.

Richie landed on his shoulder, the gravel scraping his arm and hands. With a wince, he lifted his head to see his father once again looming above, his eyes wide and hands clenched. His fist connected with Richie's eye, letting a horrible smack sound out into the air. A hand grasped Richie's shirt and dragged him back into every swing. His father seethed in anger at any attempt of escaping, yelling, "You can never," – punch – "shut your god," – punch – "damned mouth." Richie tried to fight back, tried to turn away, to scream, but his arms laid at his side, heavy. His head too stuffed with blood. Fuzzy. Everything was fuzzy and each strike left him falling. Sound escaped him, his mouth too full of iron, his throat too sore. *Help*, he tried. *Fucking help.*

The pace of the blows slowed, and Richie opened his swollen eyes to see his father breathing deeply, his chest raising and falling rapidly. He wiped sweat from his wrinkled brow, his face angry and satisfied. He had just beat his son and looked satisfied. Richie could not let that go.

So his damaged throat managed to say, "Are you done yet?"

And with his rage returning and the flames in his eyes catching, his father pulled his bloodied fist back for another swing and Richie

wincing in anticipation.

“You fucking li—,” came from his father’s mouth before the next door neighbor tackled him into the grass.

Richie turned his head to see the neighbor (what was his name?) seated on his father’s back, pushing his face to the ground. A hand touched Richie’s shoulder and he looked to see his neighbor’s girlfriend crouched next to him, a cigarette hanging from her frown. “Don’t move, kid,” she whispered, accidentally breathing worried smoke in his face. A yell came from his dad, but Richie’s blurry head blocked out the sound and darkness seeped into his sight. Richie felt her manicured nails grip his shoulder and heard her say, “Fuck, stay awake,” before his eyes slipped shut.

And then he felt nothing.

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The Wheeler family was sitting around the table eating beef stroganoff when they got a phone call. Karen looked in surprise at the phone, but turned back to Holly when she accidentally knocked her bowl over. “Ted, could you get that?” she asked her husband, but his mind was focused on shoveling noodles into his mouth and her words were left unheard. Sighing, Karen helped put some beef back into Holly’s bowl while the little girl sucked on a lock of blonde hair. “Nancy? Could you get the phone?”

Nancy looked up from her plate, annoyance in her expression. She had just gotten focused on the textbook sitting next to her food, and was not about to get distracted. She elbowed her little brother and mumbled, “Go get it.”

Mike, mouth full of beef, said, “I’m sorry, is my name Nancy?”

“Just get it,” she responded with a glare.

“Please, Mike,” his mother said, her eyes still on the fallen noodles. Mike huffed, raised his hands in stubborn defeat and walked to the ringing phone. He picked it up off the receiver and answered with his learned, “This is the Wheeler residence—may I ask who is calling?”

“Hello, this is Deborah from Child Safety Services of Maine. May I speak with Mrs. Karen Wheeler?” said the voice on the line. It was female and abnormally cheery.

Mike squinted in confusion and looked at the phone like he could see the woman on the other line. “Uh, give me a sec,” he said. “Mom, it’s for you.”

Karen let out an exhausted sigh, handed Holly back her fork, and rose from her seat. Mike gave her the phone and went to his seat.

Nancy watched him from the corner of her eye. “Who is it?” she asked. Mike shrugged his shoulders. He grabbed his fork and shoveled a large helping of stroganoff into his mouth. Nancy scrunched her nose in disgust while Karen gave the woman on the phone a forcefully cheery hello. She stood without responding for a moment, shifting from one foot to the next, until she muttered a small, “I see.” Karen then slowly pulled out the chair from the reading nook and sat herself down. Another hushed, “I see.” Mike and Nancy shared a look.

Karen was talking the way parents do when they don’t want anyone to hear, the calm, unnatural low tone that automatically sets a child on edge. She kept twirling the phone cord around her finger, but not the way she does when she’s having what she calls “scintillating conversation” with her lady friends. It was the way she spoke when her cousin told her about her cancer. When she got bad news. Even

Holly noticed the difference, the four-year-old looking with her doe eyes at her mother's fingers fumbling with the white cord. "I have to discuss it with my husband. Do you have a number that I can reach you?" She nodded and scribbled something onto the back of a bookmark, gave a small, "I'll call you back—thank you," and hung up the phone. Then, after a small gap of silence, Karen let her head fall into her hands and her shoulder hunch in a long, full bodied sigh. Mike and Nancy were too busy watching their mother to notice that Ted had gotten up and only saw his disappearance when he was suddenly crouched next to Karen. Without emotion, Karen said, "Let's go to the kitchen," and she and Ted left the kids at the table, confused and curious. Nancy helped Holly finish her dinner.

2. Chapter Two: All the strangers came today

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for you lovely comments! I said I would update in a week and I am trying my best to keep that up. I am trying to get this story going, so I hope this chapter doesn't feel rushed.

Thank you all again soooo much!

(also if it isn't already obvious, I have a problem with David Bowie and that problem is I love his music way too much)

Richie stirred at the sound of an alarm clock's rhythmic beeping. Groaning, he scrunched his nose and tried to raise his arm to his face, but instantly winced at the pain in his ribs. "Shit," he mumbled, the words bubbling uncomfortably from his abused throat.

"Richard—how are you feeling?" came an unknown voice. He squinted at the bright white lights above him to see a woman with a tight, strained smile. Her blonde hair was in a tight pony tail that pulled her skin back onto her skull.

Richie said, "Honestly, I've been better." He tried to sit up, but that made the dull pain he was experiencing double, and he let out a quick breath from him teeth. He settled for raising his head. The woman's smile twitched. "Where am I?"

"The hospital," she answered. *Shit*. Squinting to make up for his poor vision, his eyes scanned the room to see the pale, white walls of a hospital room. On his right was a heart monitor, its beeping being the belligerent alarm that awoke him. Richie sniffed and looked back at the suited woman in front of him.

"And you are?"

Standing up straighter, she said, "My name is Deborah. I am from Child Safety Services." *Shit shit shit*. Richie let his eyes close and his head fell back onto the pillow. "Fuck," he whispered, and Deborah coughed.

"You're taking me away, aren't you?" Richie opened his eyes and saw that Deborah's smile had vanished, replaced with a solemn, tight lipped purse. Richie sighed. With a poor British accent, he said, "Well that is entirely troublesome." Deborah released her abused lips and gently tugged a chair close to the bed. Before sitting she brushed her pencil skirt with her hands and adjusted the shoulder pad on her blazer. Then she sat, placing her hands in her lap.

"Richard, I—,"

Her sentence was interrupted by the door swinging open.

"Jesus fucking Christ you look awful."

With both hands still on the door, Stan stood in stunned silence, his thin eyebrows pinched in worry. His wrinkled sweater looked like it had been shoved on in a hurried rush, and his curly hair was not its usual neat, well placed waves, but completely unruly. Richie looked as wide-eyed as his swollen eyes would allow while Deborah simply stared at Stan, a look of horror on her face. Breaking the silence, Richie chuckled.

"Isn't it, like, against your culture to fuck Jesus?"

Stan's concerned expression relaxed slightly, his mouth twitching into a crooked smile. "Seriously, Rich? Really?"

Richie raised his hands, "Hey, just looking out for you, man. Don't want your folks getting scared that their son fucks Jesus."

Stan shook his head, "Yeah, I'll just leave that to you, since you seem so eager to meet him." He gestured gracefully at the bed-ridden boy before walking toward the bed and lightly shoving Richie's legs over so he could sit on the mattress. "Eddie and Ben are on their way. Mike said he was gonna stop and buy you those dumb candies you love."

"No way, pop rocks?" Stan rolled his eyes and nodded.

Richie tried to raise his arms in excitement, but instantly winced, his bruised ribs shooting pain up his sides and throughout his body.

“Take it easy, idiot,” Stan said.

Richie squinted at him in pain, a forced smile on his face. “You tell me my two loves, Eddie and pop rocks, are coming for me and don’t expect me to get excited? You are a cruel friend.” He sunk into his bed, his eyes closed. “I should just die and sleep with your boyfriend Jesus to spite you.”

“If you keep—,”

“Excuse me,” Deborah interrupted. Stan and Richie whipped their heads towards her, Richie following with a hushed cringe. “I don’t mean to interrupt this—,” she paused, “banter.” Stan raised an eyebrow at the woman.

“I’m sorry but Richard and I—we need to talk.”

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“Kids, we need to talk,” Karen called.

Nancy and Mike had both helped clear the table and did the dishes after their parent’s mysterious departure from dinner. Karen and Ted had left the kids to themselves for hours, both the teens wondering in curious and concerned silence as the muted voices of their parents in their bedroom floated downstairs. Once the voices lingered into silence, Ted and Karen slowly made their way to the first floor, passed their kids, and went straight to the phone. Now, at the sound of their mother’s call, Mike jumped out of the La-Z-boy and ran to the dining room while Nancy grabbed her little sister, placed her on her hip, and carried her.

They were met with thick air and palatable tension. Karen’s red eyes studied the kids as they made their way into the room, her lips pinched and her hands forcefully folded on the wooden table. Ted sat beside her, his expression lacking the normal detached, glazed eyes the kids had always known. “Here, Nancy, I’ll take Holly,” Karen said, her voice steady and practiced.

Nancy handed her sister over before taking her normal seat next to her brother. Mike and Nancy shared a brief look before returning

their gazes to their mother. Karen patted her daughter's hair and fixed her little hair red hair bows before taking a deep breath and letting it out in one long continuous sigh.

"Do you two remember your aunt Maggie?" Nancy's eyebrows shot up while Mike's furrowed in confusion. Mike shook his head while Nancy nodded. Karen continued, "You were very young the last time we saw her. My sister and I—we don't talk very much." Karen kept smoothing Holly's bangs, the little girl squirming under the movement. Ted put a hand on Karen's shoulder, and Karen held the little girl out to him. He took her and bounced the blonde on his lap.

"Nancy, so you remember her?" Karen asked.

Nancy blinked before saying, "Yeah, I mean, she visited that one time at my birthday party or something, right?" Karen gave a small nod.

"And do you remember your cousin Richard? He's about your age."

She looked at the ceiling before answering with an affirmative, "He was there, too. He had some," gesturing at her face, "really big glasses and said a bad word so he got a time out." Mike gave a breathy laugh through his nose.

The group let a silence fall on them, the wall clock ticking in the kitchen, rhythmically timing the passing seconds. After letting out another sigh, Karen said, "My sister and her husband have a serious alcohol problem." She picked at a crack in the table. "Apparently, your uncle Wentworth has been beating your cousin for years and was arrested this morning." Both the kids gasped.

"Is he okay?" Mike asked.

Karen looked at him her expression blank. With tired eyes and a shaky breath, she stated, "He's in the hospital. He's going to stay there for a little while, until he's all healed. Then he'll leave." Karen closed her eyes, straightened her back and let another silence blanket the room. Nancy covered her mouth with a hand while Mike chewed on his lips.

Then, with a voice firm, Karen said, "And then Richard is going to

come live with us.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thnx for reading! As always, comments and critiques are welcome and encouraged.

Thank you and I will (hopefully) see you soon.

3. Chapter Three: I'm the space invader

Notes for the Chapter:

so I already failed the "update once a week" promise I made. In my defense, this is finals week.

finals are mean.

also MERRY CHRISTMAS to all my Christmas celebrating readers.

"So, when is your cousin is moving in?" Dustin tossed his hat onto the sofa before plopping unceremoniously on the wooden chair by the table. He rocked it back and forth on the uneven legs.

"No idea—when he gets better I guess," Mike responded. He pulled out his own chair, taking a seat. Will took the chair on Dustin's right, quietly slipping into the seat before adjusting the collar of his sweater. His fingers tapped lightly on the cheap, fold out table they used for their games of Dungeons and Dragons.

"It's really nice of your parents to let him live here." Will picked at the plastic chipping on the table top. A slam from the top of the stairs made the three whip their heads around, and Max and Lucas quickly came down the steps. Lucas pulled out a foldable metal chair for Max, setting it up and brushing any dust off before letting her sit. She gave him a crinkled smile before sitting down and scooching the chair to next to Mike's.

"Thanks, Lucas," she said.

"Yeah, thanks Lucas," Dustin responded, giving a mock, exaggerated sigh with his chin resting on his hand. Lucas shoved his head. Giggling, Dustin smacked his hand away before puckering his lips and making loud, dramatic kissing sounds. Max narrowed her eyes, reached across the table, and flicked his forehead.

Mike stood and grabbed his Dungeon Master screen from under the table, unfolding it. "Are we ready to start this new campaign, or are you going to beat up Dustin first?"

"I vote beat up Dustin," Will said, arm stretched above his head.

"Second," Lucas responded, flicking Dustin's forehead again. Dustin swatted his hand away.

"Hey, I'm delicate!"

Lucas answered with a snort. Mike hushed the group, shaking his head in exasperation and laughter. They settled into their seats, Mike getting one flick on the back of Dustin's head before handing out the player sheets and helping Max remember the hit point levels for her new Rogue character.

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"Do you even know where he's going to sleep?" Jonathan asked, helping Nancy with the dishes from lunch. He turned the faucet off, testing the heat of the water with a wary dip of his hand before placing the plates into the sink.

Nancy shrugged. "No idea. Mom and Dad keep having private talks and stuff. A social worker even came over the other day." She twitched her lips and furrowed her brows. "I don't think they'll tell us anything until they know for sure." She leaned her hands against the counter, watching Jonathan from the side of her eye. He nodded before sniffing and rubbing his nose on his shoulder.

"The social worker—has she told you how he is?"

Placing a stray curl behind her ear, Nancy shook her head, "A little. Said he had a fractured rib or something. Apparently, we'll have to help him ice it when he's here."

"No, I mean," Jonathan paused, "I mean— how is he?"

He and Nancy shared a long, unflinching stare. A drop of water fell from the faucet before Nancy stated, "Not sure." She picked at her fingernails. "I haven't seen him in years. He was really goofy when he was little, but that was when he was ten or something." Placing her chin on Jonathan's left shoulder, she continued, "He talked really fast and had tons of energy. You think he'll be a lot different?"

Jonathan shrugged, “Probably. Problems with parents—that stuff can really mess you up.” They let another silence gracefully fall as Jonathan placed washed dishes onto the strainer. Nancy left his side to grab a dish towel and started wiping the plates dry. With a tilt of her head, Nancy saw Jonathan’s eyes purposefully concentrating on the dishes, his hands scrubbing with force. Nancy picked up another plate.

“Did you dad do that to you?” she asked. Jonathan halted and whipped his head to her, focused eyes now furrowed with confusion. “Did he hit you?”

Jonathan sighed and shook his head no. “The most he did was hit me on the back of my head when I broke his favorite mug. He was more into,” he paused, “verbal assault.” Nancy took his hand. Jonathan weaved their fingers together. “Mom would have killed him if he tried anything physical,” he said with a smile.

Nancy snorted, “Yeah she would have.” Raising their clasped hands, Jonathan ghosted his lips on Nancy’s knuckles before putting his dish-water-wet arm around her shoulder.

“It’ll be fine. He’s related to you,” he said, pausing to put a quick kiss on her forehead, before saying, “How bad could he be?”

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“OW OW JESUS FUCK YOU—YOU TRYING TO KILL ME?” Richie shouted, squirming away from the nurse.

“Richard, calm down, I’m just changing your bandage,” the nurse said, his voice calm and detached.

“BACK AWAY, DEVIL, IN THE NAME OF THE LORD.” Richie raised his hands to form a cross.

Sighing, the nurse reasoned, “Do I really have to sedate you just to change the bandage on your cheek? Calm down or you’ll irritate your stitches.” He reached toward the white bandage. With a quick swat of his arm, Richie smacked the offending hand away. The motion caused an ache in his damaged ribs, and he gave a loud wince

through his teeth. The nurse took his hesitation as an opportunity, and snatched the bandage off with a quick pull. Richie yelped.

“Good, it’s off.” The nurse showed Richie the stained bandage, once white now tainted with yellow fluid. “I need to clean it so you don’t get a scar, alright?”

Richie tensed before giving a little chuckle. “But another scar will add to my street-cred. You know all about street-cred, right, my man?” The nurse shook his head, grabbing a cotton swab covered in an antiseptic gel. Richie’s shoulder hunched in pain when the swab connected with his stitches. In between shudders, he said, “I’m sure—ow—all the other nurses have stories about weird medical encounters and shit. You ever, like, had to get a toy out of someone’s ass or something?” The nurse scrunched his nose and Richie continued, “If you’ve done something like that, that’s some serious nurse-street-cred right there.”

The nurse grabbed a new bandage and gently placed it over the wound, pressing with a force that was unnecessarily strong. Before Richie could make a remark, the nurse stood and packed up his gauze and antiseptic. “What—leaving already? We just started learning about each other?” Richie called.

Before leaving the room, Richie caught the nurse mumble, “Christ, kid, no wonder he beat you.” The door slammed.

Richie sat in the bed, staring at the door, fingers smoothing and wrinkling his sterile hospital blanket. In the hall, he heard the passing feet of doctors and nurses, rushing to patients. Saw the faces of concerned family members walking, intent on finding their loved one’s room. In the stillness of his room, Richie willed himself not to pick at his stitches, firmly pushing his head back onto his pillow. *The guys are coming back tomorrow. The guys are coming back tomorrow* he chanted internally, squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his hands. Silence filled the room, and Richie snapped his fingers. Clicked his tongue. Anything to keep it from being quiet. With a long sigh, Richie forced himself to smile, the stretch of his face pulling on his stitches. Then, he said the first quote that came to his head.

“Would you stop feeling sorry for yourself,” he said. “It’s bad for your

complexion.”

Notes for the Chapter:

(if you haven't noticed already, my go-to swear words irl are jesus and fuck. you'll see a lot of those in this fic.)

((also ten points for the first person to name the movie that was quoted))

4. Chapter Four: They're quite aware of what they're going through

Notes for the Chapter:

I return and I return with angst.

Thank you all for your lovely comments! I know I definitely haven't been updating as regularly as I would like. Work has been beating my ass lately and I just started back up with the spring semester, so I will likely follow this irregular updating pattern.

sorry

“WHAT?” Mike shouted.

“Lower your voice,” Karen stated, her tone short and forceful.

Mike rubbed his face, exasperated. “You’re kidding me right, Mom? My room? You’re giving him my room?” He was standing in front of his seated parents, his legs shaking. With fists clenched at his sides, Mike stared, his eyes switching between his mother and his father, them both looking back with furrowed brows and stiff lips. “Where am I supposed to sleep, huh?”

Ted spoke first, “In the basement. You and your friends practically live down there, anyway.” He pushed his oversized glasses up with his pointer finger.

Mike groaned, raising his arms above his head. “But it’s my room! Why don’t you just move Holly into Nancy’s room and give him hers?” Mike heard Nancy’s whispered gasp from the corner. Holly’s twisted her head to her brother at the sound of her name. She was silently brushing the hair of her Cabbage Patch Kid before Mike interrupted her focus. Now she was sucking on a lock of her own hair, her knees pulled up to her chest, hugging her doll.

“Mike, Holly is growing. She’s going to need her own space,” Karen spoke with finality. Her slight slouch showed her exhaustion, her hands clasped in her lap. Ted, seated on her left, buttoned up his cardigan.

"Now, son, we don't have that many options here." Mike rolled his eyes while Ted continued. "We considered getting one of those bunk beds for your room, but—,"

Karen interrupted, "We still don't really know how Richard will—," she paused, "—we're not sure how he'll be—emotionally. It might be best for him to have an area he can call his own." She unclasped her hands and straightened her skirt.

"What, and I can't?" Mike said, his volume rising. "He gets to just come here and take my room just because he might be a freaking psycho?"

Karen's eyes widened. "Mike—,"

"Jeez, if you're so afraid he's going to be crazy, don't bring him here in the first place—don't punish me because of it! It's not my fault your sister is such a—"

"MICHAEL WHEELER THAT IS ENOUGH," Karen shouted, jumping to her feet. Mike mumbled to himself, looking at the ground. Holly stared up at him, sniffing slightly. She hugged her Cabbage Patch tighter. With a shaky inhalation, Karen spoke, her voice saturated in restrained anger. "Mike, I know this is difficult for you," she took another breath, "but whether you like it or not, he is coming to live here. You will show him kindness and graciously give him your room, and you will happily sleep in the basement, knowing that both your parents are upstairs."

"But mom—," Mike reasoned.

"No buts." She raised her hand in front of his face, her eyebrows pinched and her lips firmly pursed. With a slow exhale, Karen lowered her hand. She walked past Mike, left the room with slow steps, and went into the kitchen. Seconds after, Ted stood with an exaggerated groan. He adjusted the waist of his pants, pulling them higher on his slightly protruding stomach.

"You should be more grateful for what you have, son." With a firm hand, he clasped Mike's shoulder, who quickly shrugged him off. Ted ignored the action in favor of following his wife into the kitchen.

Mike stood rooted, his arms crossed, murmuring under his breath, “so stupid,” and, “bullshit.”

Nancy raised her eyebrows at him, her hands on her hips. “Well, someone’s a little selfish.”

Mike shot back, “I didn’t hear you offering up your room, did I?” He and Nancy shared a challenging stare before she sniffed, raising her head to look at him past her nose. She did a quick spin and left, running up stairs.

To her own bedroom.

Mike huffed.

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“So, your aunt and I have been in contact, and she has been made aware of the date of your release.” Deborah spoke, the pen in her hand writing unknown notes on her clipboard. Richie rubbed his nose, watching the pen scratch on the paper, occasionally halting the rhythm with dotting “I”s. Deborah sat in front of him, once again in her pencil skirt and sporting a shoulder padded jacket, but with her hair styled in close, overly poofy curls. He didn’t like the look for her.

“In two days, I will accompany you to the bus station in Portland. Your aunt tells me she will meet you halfway in Buffalo, and then you will make the rest of the journey with her.” She nodded at her notes, satisfied with the arrangement she had made. Brushing a curl from her cheek, Deborah read over her notes once more before quickly raising her head. “I heard you all helped Richard pack?”

In the corner, doing their best to blend into the wallpaper, were Stan, Mike, Ben, and Eddie. Upon entry into the room, Deborah had quickly corralled them to a single sofa and ordered that, “If you are not going to leave Richard and I alone, you had better be quiet.” They jumped at her addressing them. Deborah eyed them curiously, tapping her pen on her clip board. Mike spoke first.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, looking quickly from her to Richie. “We packed Richie’s clothes and records for him.” He kept his voice

steady to distract from his obvious discomfort. His arms were raised in front of his chest, folded loosely, and his usually perfect posture was bent into a curved question mark. The other boys nodded, their body's reflecting similar awkward tension. Richie pursed his lips, resisting the need to joke about their obvious fear.

"Great, be sure to help him bring it all to the bus station on Thursday." She smacked her clipboard, making everyone jump, and abruptly stood, brushing her skirt. "I'll see you then, Richard."

"It's Richie-,"

"Be sure to pack as compactly as possible," she interrupted, pushing up her sleeve to read the time. "Keep icing your ribs." Then, Deborah gave the boys in the corner a little smile and swiftly left the room, gently closing the door behind her. The four boys instantly sighed in relief. Richie let out a snort.

"Holy shit you guys. Relax. The she-beast is gone." Ben sniffed and scratched his ear while Eddie rolled his eyes. Richie giggled, "Honestly, I thought only Ben was afraid of women after his run-in with the school librarian. Tell me, Benny old-boy, did her cooch really smell so bad you've been turned off all women but Bev?"

They group simultaneously stated, "Beep beep, Richie."

"What, come on," Richie continued, his laughter picking up. "She's a fucking social worker, what do you think she's going to do? Take you away, too?" He gave another belly laugh, his face flinching in subtle pain.

The boys all stood, their faces ashen and their fingers clenched. Mike and Ben shared a small glance before looking toward the ground. Stan looked directly at Richie, his eyebrows pinched. Rich let out another painful laugh, "Make sure when Bill gets here tomorrow that you let him know—don't want him to make a scene and get taken away, too" Again, the group flinched.

Eddie spoke, "Richie, stop it—that's not funny."

"Come on, Eds, its a little funny."

“No, it’s fucking stupid,” Eddie said, anger bubbling from his gut. He unconsciously reached for his absent fanny pack for his inhaler.

Richie’s chortles were mixing with shallow coughs as he said, “I guess if you were in my shoes, you’d see the irony of Bill coming home from his aunt’s while I’m being shipped off to hers—,”

“Shut the fuck up, Richie!” Eddie shouted. Stan grumbled a comment about lowering the volume while Eddie continued, “You’re in the fucking hospital—it’s not funny.” Richie let out another cough. “God, have you even seen what he did to your face?”

Richie gave a face of contemplation, raising an eyebrow, before letting out another gravelly cough. “I think I look rugged.” He gave a lopsided grin with a snigger. Then he fell into a coughing fit.

“Christ, Rich,” Eddie mumbled, walking to his side, ignoring the uncomfortable looks from Stan. “Have you been taking deep breaths? You know that if your ribs are broken and if you don’t take big enough breaths, you can get pneumonia?” He ran a hand through his hair, fingers wriggling nervously. “Oh, god, have you checked if blood came up when you coughed? You need to check if blood came up when you coughed. I should call a nurse, because that is a symptom of tuberculosis, too. And what if—,”

“Eds, I’m fine,” Richie mumbled in between shallow coughs. “The doctors checked for that already—pneumonia, not the other one.” He gave him a limp thumbs-up. Eddie’s shoulder’s relaxed. In the white-walled, sterile room, a still, uncomfortable silence fell on the group. Mike gave a relieved sigh from the corner, his eyes watching something outside the window. Ben gave a little snuffle while Stan looked motionless at the floor. Eddie broke the silence in a small, controlled voice.

“You don’t look rugged. You look like your dad beat you up so fucking bad you ended up in the hospital.” Richie looked anywhere but Eddie, his challenging stare chipping away his cheery façade. “You look terrible, and now you’re getting taken away,” his voice cracked. Shaky, he stated, “And I can’t fucking do this,” before turning and walking out of the room, noticeably wiping his eyes before slamming the door behind him.

While Richie stared at the door, he missed Stan rubbing a tear from his cheek with his shoulder. Missed Mike subtly dabbing his nose with a tissue, still staring out the window. Missed Ben's low, controlled exhale. His furrowed eyebrows watched the door, begging Eddie to come back in. *You know I can't follow you right now, asshole. Come back.* When a minute passed, Richie sighed and turned back to his other friends.

"So you packed my records?" he asked.

Notes for the Chapter:

The easiest part of writing these chapters is finding Bowie quotes for chapter titles. His music is the best and i love him.

5. Chapter Five: I never thought I'd need so many people

Notes for the Chapter:

Once again I'm taking longer than I would like to update. I will try and get better at that.

Thank you all for the comments! I can't really believe that people are actually looking forward to my updates-- its all really weird

When Richie was released from the hospital, he stood as close to his friends as possible. Bill had arrived that morning, his newly trimming hair ragged and his face sleepless. He burst into the room, pausing for a moment to absorb the image of the broken boy in front of him. His eyes shifted from Richie to the nurse next to him, who gave a look of surprise. Then, Bill spoke, his voice still the shaky stammers of his youth, "W-w-when I got the phone call from s-Stan I just—I'm s-sorry I came as quickly a-a-as I could." The nurse looked back at Richie, whose eyes were wide.

Richie then gave a sniff. "Coming quickly? Bill, you know I like you to last as long as possible." There was a silent pause before the nurse groaned. Bill's lips twitched into an exasperated smile.

With the rest of the Losers at his side, Richie walked out of the hospital, his steps as natural as possible. He made sure to give his favorite nurse a wink and a blown kiss before piling into the back of Mike's pick-up truck and heading to the pharmacy. Mike drove as smoothly as possible, silently scared the bumps might hurt Richie's ribs. In the bay of the truck, the rest of the losers sat back, watching the many sights of Derry pass by their eyes. The kissing bridge. The arcade. The Aladdin. All the same views and places that their young, childhood-selves explored and conquered. The Standpipe tower still stood, gracefully watching the town with its rusty, decrepit metal. The graffiti was still new and glossy, painted over the old, chipped colors of the past. The roads were still rocky and full of potholes, the townsfolk still selfish and loving. In the stillness of the town and the silence of the passengers, the boys sat and absorbed their

surroundings. A small bump made Richie's breath ragged, but with a pat on his leg by Eddie, Richie allowed himself to make his breaths slow and full. Eddie let his head fall on his shoulder, his eyes still watching the passing trees and birds. Stan whispered to himself in the silence about the birds, saying something about swallows and their migratory patterns. Richie did his best to memorize this useless information, closing his eyes and catching every detail.

When they arrived at the pharmacy, Eddie went in with Richie to get his prescription pain medication. Richie did his best not to knock into anything while inside of the crowded, sterilized building, his lack of glasses a struggle. He held onto the hem of Eddie's shirt as he led him to the pharmacist, greeting him with a warm, familiar hello. Richie squinted at the Mr. Keene, trying to make the fuzz of his eyes focus.

"Hello, Edward, enjoying your summer?" He grinned, his horse teeth glistening, yellow and crooked. "We haven't seen you in here in a few days—I was getting worried." Eddie gave him a stiff, courteous answer before presenting Richie's prescription.

Mr. Keene observed the slip, his nose crinkling a little, before he raised his head, his eyes looking past Eddie at Richie. With eyes full of forced concern, he addressed the boy.

"And how are you doing, Richard?" He tilted his head to side, his eyebrows upturned and his lips stretched in a thin, sympathetic smile.

Richie raised an eyebrow. "Peachy," he responded.

Mr. Keene paused before nodding to himself and turning back to locate the pain medication. Richie nicked two packages of cigarettes behind his back.

When they returned to Mike's truck, pain medication in hand, the boys piled back into the pickup. From there, the journey was a short, two-minute trip to Richie's house. Mike parked on the grass, his tires digging into the overgrowth. With a hammer in his heart, Richie stared at the familiar fallen shutters and the front door his father had painted green. He put his feet on the gravel, his shoes crunching on the rocks. "My parents are still in jail, right? They didn't post bail?"

Ben answered, "They did, but your folks couldn't pay up. So they're staying in until they get a sentencing." Richie let out a small breath of relief before running up the steps like he usually did. When he got to the door, he reached in his pocket for his house keys, but halted.

"Shit, I don't have my keys."

Bill interrupted, "It's unlocked." Richie eyed them with suspicious glares while they all just nodded. Eddie gave him a light shove toward the door before Richie relented and turned the knob. His normally cramped, couch filled living room had been rearranged, the sofa pushed far against the wall and his father's sofa moved to another unknown location. In the center of the room were two air mattresses and an array of sleeping bags, pillows, and blankets. There was a small stash of junk food displayed in the middle of the maroon carpeted floor. Richie turned back toward his friends, them giving him little smiles and light pats on his shoulders.

"What, did you think we were going to leave you alone on your last day?" Eddie asked, his smile slightly forced as his hand grasped Richie's. "Don't be stupid." On Eddie's left, Stan and Ben both nodded in approval at the insult.

And with the sight of his friends and the work they put in to help him, the love they showed him in their concern and actions, Richie felt the weight of his departure fully. He tightened his grip on Eddie's hand as he felt the familiar presence of his found family standing around him. Before he let what was threatening to breach his eyes flow down his cheeks, he released the boy's hand, stepping toward the pillows and blankets. After letting a small, shuddering breath escape his lips, he turned towards the others, a grin on his swollen face. Putting on his valley-girl voice, he said, "Oh my God, I like, can't believe were going to have a sleep over."

.....

A few hours had passed and the boys were surrounded by the darkness of late evening, taking a break from the board games to watch a movie. Richie had insisted that they play one more round of Mystery Date, but after Mike got paired with the clown, the boys quickly changed to a different game. Boggle lasted a while, but Ben

dominated the group, and soon Richie and Bill were making up words, insisting that they were true and giving them elaborate definitions. It was during one of these times that Ben, in his frustration, accidentally spilled his Surge on Eddie's hand. The boy quickly began to self-destruct, so they all quickly ran to his rescue, gathering paper towels and soap. After that, they decided to relax and turn on the TV, finding that CaddyShack was playing. Soon, they were absorbed in the film, but paused often to throw pillows at Richie as he quoted it verbatim. He giggled, wincing slightly, but in the moment, no one noticed. And he was happy.

Richie rose to use the restroom, still quoting as he went. Before he returned to his comfortable mattress, he grabbed a glass of water from the tap. The telephone let out a loud, shrill ring, making Richie jump. With a sigh and a shake of his head, he picked up the receiver. "Hello, there. You've reached the Tozier residence. We are currently having way more fun than you, but if you insist on interrupting us —,"

"Holy fucking shit I caught you."

Richie stiffened, before a small laugh bubbled from his chest. "Bev? Since when are you calling me and not your loving boyfriend? He's in the other room shoving Cheetos in his face, I'll get him for—,"

"Jesus, Richie shut up for a second. I wanted to talk to you." He heard her tapping her fingers against the phone. "How are you?"

"Aw, Beverly, that's so sweet of you." He put on a mock trans-Atlantic accent and said, "Well, I'm doing mighty fine this evening. And you, my darling? How is the family?"

"I mean it, Rich." She paused, "How are you? Really?" Richie sniffed, taking a breath. Bev continued, "When do you leave?"

He mumbled, "Tomorrow morning." He heard her give a whispered curse, letting a silence fall on the two of them. CaddyShack was still blaring in the living room as Richie inhaled to speak before pausing again.

"Richie. Remember, I know exactly what you're going through.

Exactly,” she asserted, “and is sucked ass.” Richie rubbed his eyebrows, squeezing his eyes shut.

He struggled to find the words, the phrases that properly expressed the clench in his chest and the burn of stifled tears in his throat. “What do you want me to say, Bev?” he asked.

She thought for a moment before saying, “Promise me that you’ll call me once you’re settled at your Aunt’s house. Promise me.”

Richie gave a weak laugh and stated, “I promise. Cross my heart. You can’t see me, but I’m doing the whole deal—with my fingers and everything.”

“You better be. Shit—I have to go—my aunt gets pissed when I make phone calls this late.”

“Do you want to talk to Ben before you go?”

“It’s okay. I’ll call him tomorrow. And you’ll call me on Saturday or something, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

She sniffed, “You better. Bye, Trashmouth. Love you, you idiot.”

Richie smiled. “Love you, too, Bevy.” With a final click of the receiver, Richie was left once again alone in the kitchen. Not bothering to rejoin his friends, he grabbed one of the cigarettes he stole, searched in a drawer for a lighter, and turned to the back door. Richie sat on the concrete steps, his legs drawn up to his chest, and lit it on the first try. With a struggling breath, he inhaled the smoke, letting it sting his lungs before exhaling low and slow. He took another drag when the screen door openings behind him.

“Don’t let Eddie see you doing that—he’ll get pissed.” Stan gave a small groan as he sat beside Richie. He side eyed the boy before taking the lighter from his hands. He lit it and let his fingers quickly pass through the flame, back and forth, before blowing it out. Richie took a silent puff.

“Hey, Stan,” Richie asked, letting his cigarette dangle in between his

pointer and middle finger. The other boy turned to him, brushing his curly hair out of his eyes. He nodded at him to continue. “Does your Bible—the Torah or whatever—does it say anything about this stuff? Why shit like this happens to people?”

Stan furrowed his eyebrows and jerked his head, taken aback. Richie gave him a patient look as Stan’s eyes looked from the right to the left, his mind searching. It was only after a distant owl sounded that Stan mumbled Hebrew under his breath. His eyes darted from Richie to the ground as he said, “The, um... The secret things belong to Adonai our God, but the—er—the things that have been revealed belong to us and our children forever.”

Richie squinted his glasses-less eyes at the boy, the corners of his mouth twitching. “The secret things belong to God, huh?” He took a drag. “What a fucking cop-out answer.”

He snuffed out his cigarette.

Notes for the Chapter:

I decided to keep this chapter just with the losers. Rich needs some love, and they are doing their best to give it to him.

Also, I do not intend to offend with Richie's last line from the Bible. I was raised Christian, and have a lot of respect for the faith, but I remember learning this verse (Deuteronomy 29:29) back in sunday school and feeling like it was a cop-out.

also also Beverly was finally here! I don't know why, but I was really looking forward to writing their little exchange.

6. Chapter Six: It's time to leave your capsule if you dare

Notes for the Chapter:

I live.

Again, updating regularly is very difficult. Life is sorta ridiculous at the moment.

Finishing up my last year of undergrad with a degree in English involves a lot of writing.

Writing about school stuff. Boring writing.

That and the combination of finding a school to do my masters at and working full time is making me go insane.

Thank you for your patience (if anyone is still reading this) This is the longest update I've done so far, so I hope that makes up for my inconsistency.

Lucas slammed the cardboard box down at the bottom of the stairs before straightening his back with a crack. Behind him Dustin came bounding down, his arms full of Star Wars toys and pillows. "Break time's over, Lucas," he said, lightly shoving the boy. "No time for slacking."

Lucas glared before saying, "Oh, pardon me. It's not like I just carried Mike's encyclopedias down two flights of stairs."

"Yeah, well you're the one who wanted to impress Mrs. Wheeler with your manliness." Dustin emptied his arms onto the pull-out bed, letting the toys bounce on the springy mattress. They had successfully rearranged the basement into something resembling a bedroom. The old couch had been converted into a bed, they folded up the Dungeons and Dragons table, and they had, with much reluctance from Mike, disassembled Eleven's blanket fort in favor of a bookshelf.

Lucas lowered to a squat before raising the box back off the ground with a grunt. He shuffled his way to the new bookshelf before his arms gave out and the box landed on the floor with a loud thump. He shook the stiffness out of his hands. "Why are we even bringing all

these down here, anyway? Why aren't we leaving it all in Mike's old room?"

"Because mom wants to make sure that Richard has enough space for all of his crap." The boys turned to see Mike standing by the stairs, a laundry bin full of folded clothes on his right hip. His spoke like the words left a bad taste in his mouth.

Lucas sniffed, his mouth twitching. "I don't get it—why don't they put Holly in Nancy's room? It's not like Nancy will be living here much longer, with her graduating high school next year."

Mike widened his eyes and nodded. He quickly put his belongings on the pull-out before raising his hands. With dramatic arm waves, he said, "Right? It would be so much easier if she was in Nancy's room."

Dustin pursed his lips and rubbed his nose. "Seems pretty stupid."

"Totally stupid," Mike responded with a huff. He let himself fall backwards onto his new bed, releasing a musty smell of filth and weeks-old junk food into the air. Above him, a small little cluster of dust floated down from the ceiling, slowing landing on top of his nose. He groaned.

With a creak from the bed springs, Dustin laid down beside Mike, his hands folded on his stomach. "Mikey, listen, you've gotta try and look on the bright side."

Mike furrowed his eyebrows. "What bright side?"

Dustin shrugged, "I dunno. Your basement is way bigger than your old room."

"And you have enough space in here to get your own TV for your Atari," Lucas said, sitting in between the boys. Mike grumbled.

"Yeah, and you have a door to outside in your own room. Now Eleven can sneak in whenever she wants," Dustin wiggled his eyebrows and elbowed Mike's side. Mike let out an embarrassed sound and whipped his pillow at Dustin's face.

Lucas snickered before imitating a dramatic swoon, hands over his

heart, and letting out a breathy, “Oh, Eleven.” Mike gave a whiny moan and rolled over, burying his face in the blankets. Both Lucas and Dustin laid themselves on top of Mike, letting out theatrical, giggling teases while Mike swatted them away with embarrassed retorts. A “Mike, I love you” from Dustin earned him a shove while a “Oh, Eleven, kiss me” from Lucas got him a knee to his side. With small wincers, the boys continued until a call resounded from the top of the stairs.

“Mike, come up here—Mom is leaving,” Nancy bellowed. She didn’t wait for a response, but slammed the door, making the wooden stairs shudder and dust snow from the ceiling. The boys stood and rushed up the steps.

In the kitchen stood Ted, Nancy, and Karen, Holly held firmly in her arms. She gave her blonde head a quick kiss before placing her on the floor. Holly remained by her mother, grabbing at her shirt sleeve and placing a thumb in her mouth, which Karen promptly removed. Karen’s head eyes rose to meet the boys and she gave them a small, forced smile.

“Boys, thank you so much for helping Mike move downstairs.” Lucas and Dustin responded with quiet “you’re welcomes” while Karen nodded. She took a deep inhale before opening her arms with exaggerated excitement. “Well, I’m off to get your cousin. I should be in Buffalo by 8’clock or so. Nancy, make sure to keep the phones open. I’ll call when I get to the hotel.” Nancy fought an offended expression and gave a quick jerk of her head for a nod. Karen continued, “And Ted, would you make sure the boys vacuum Richard’s room? I want him coming home to a clean space.” Mike shared a sideways glance with Lucas and Dustin, his eyebrows furrowed and his arms crossed.

With a slow, steady inhale, Karen clapped her hands together and walked to Ted. She gave him a quick hug and pat on the shoulder before turning to Nancy and doing the same. When she swiveled her head to Mike, he stiffened in preparation. Karen grabbed him by his shoulders and pulled him into a bruising hug, firm on his arms that she pinned to his side. “Thank you for doing this for you cousin,” she whispered before letting him go, giving a tight-lipped smile, and heading out the door. Mike barely got to react as Ted followed with

her suitcase, leaving the boys and Nancy watching from the kitchen.

In the new quiet of the kitchen, Mike watched as his mother's Volkswagon exited the driveway, leaving them behind. When she returned, what had become their normal, daily lives would be changing. The normal they had created since the insanity of the past two years would be interrupted. Mike sniffed, his fingers twitching in the unknown.

Breaking the silence, Nancy gave a small cough before raising her eyebrows and pointing at the vacuum cleaner. Mike rolled his eyes and groaned.

.....

When Richie awoke, with a crook in his shoulder and a foot in his spine, he found himself surrounded by the irreplaceable comfort of his friends. The boys curled together, the air mattresses deflated from the weight of Ben, Bill, and Stan. Sometime in the night, they all found themselves curled in sleeping bags, rolled close together and awkwardly sleeping on the discolored shag carpet. The late night giggles and cigarettes had slowly faded into sleep. The foot belonged to Mike, who was notorious for sleep-kicking. Richie gave a light flick at his socked foot, and Mike immediately kicked once before turning onto his side. Richie held his breath, pain emanating from his ribs and travelling up his sides. With a quiet grunt, he pushed himself to sit. Wiping the sleep from his eyes made him brush his bandage-covered stitches, reminding him that he needed to keep those clean. Resisting the urge to pick at his bandage, Richie stood as gracefully as a newborn deer. He winced and cringed as the pain of fractured ribs and crowded sleep shot through his body. Split lip between teeth, he let out a quite curse under his breath. Then, careful not to disturb his sleeping friends, he tiptoed over legs and bodies to go clean his face.

When Richie entered the kitchen, he stumbled slightly over his packed bags. It was his school bag stuffed full of his clothes, a duffel carrying more laundry and stuff like his Walkman, his mother's Polaroid camera that he nicked, tooth brush, deodorant, and birth certificate—just the essentials—and a cardboard box full of alphabetized vinyl and cassettes. Richie stared briefly at the pile of his possessions neatly organized on the floor before rubbing his nose

and pulling out a wooden stool next to the island.

“You’re up early,” said a voice from behind him. Richie jolted in surprise and slammed his knee into the counter.

“Jesus fuck—shit ow,” streamed from Richie’s clenched teeth. With a gasp, Eddie rushed to his side.

“Shit—sorry I didn’t mean to scare you—oh god, is it your ribs? Do you need some ice? Or some Oxycodone? Here, let me grab your pain meds, I think I left them over—,”

“Eds, hey—relax I’m fine,” Richie said, raising his hands to calm the boy. His eye twitched in a small cringe from the pain, but it quickly faded to a slight ache. Eddie stood still, his shoulders raised high and his arms stiff. Richie looked at him with squinting eyes before sighing and reaching out. He lightly grasped Eddie’s arm, pulling him over to him. “Hey, come on, Eds. You’ve gotta relax.” Richie took both arms and began waving them back and forth. “You need to be like a noodle, my Eddie Spaghetti. That’s it—channel your true, noodle self,” he said.

“Shut up, Richie,” Eddie responded, wrinkling his nose. He let Richie wave his arms for a moment longer before retracting his hands and sitting on the stool next to him. “Why are you awake?”

Richie pointed at his cheek. “Gotta change this.” On the counter, neatly placed, were the medications, bandages, and petroleum jelly he’d gotten from the pharmacy.

“Do you even know how to do that?” Eddie raised an eyebrow.

“Sure I do,” Richie said before gripping the edge of the bandage and ripping it off in one swift motion. He immediately recoiled.

Eddie grabbed his face before smacking Richie’s hand. “You idiot—you could have taken out your stitches.” He quickly swiped the medical supplies from Richie and straightened himself on his seat. With practiced hands, Eddie put a small amount of water onto a washcloth. He then leaned close to Richie, gently cleaning the dried, crusty blood from around the wound. As Eddie treated the cut,

careful not to apply too much pressure, Richie stared at the boy in front of him. Brown eyes. Long eyelashes. Light, spotty freckles. Richie's studying gaze made their eyes connect, and for a fleeting moment, Eddie halted his cleaning to stare right back. His eyes flitted between the stitches and the piercing gaze until he forced himself to look into the wound. Eddie took a breath.

"Part of me is really happy you are leaving." Richie stiffened as Eddie continued. "Part of me is so—," a breath, "so fucking happy that you are going to stay somewhere safe." He put down the washcloth and took a cotton swab from the pile of medical supplies. He dipped it in the petroleum jelly before turning back to Richie and lightly painting his stitches. The jelly soothed his irritated gash. "I'm fucking thrilled that you're going somewhere without your parents and stupid town bullies and a god-damned, fucking evil clown." His fingers shook as he placed the bandage on Richie's cheek. Then, Eddie look at the floor, his hands clasped on his lap as he leaned back and away from Richie. Then, in a small, shaking voice, he whispered, "But I wish you could stay."

Richie instantly closed the distance Eddie created, reaching out and cradling the boy's face in his hands. "Eddie, look at me." Eddie's eyes stayed downcast as his lower lip gave a twitch. Richie's thumbs rubbed little circles on his cheeks. "Stop talking like you're never gonna see me again." Richie gave a small, laughing exhale through his nose. Eddie let a small tear escape and Richie quickly swiped it away. "Eds, look at me."

The boy mumbled, "Don't call me 'Eds'" before connecting his watery eyes to Richie's. "We're still going to get into NYU together, right? Still going to explore the city, yeah?" Eddie sniffed and nodded. "And do you really think I won't call? Or send you letters? Hell, I'll have to come back to Derry for the Halloween festival—those pumpkins won't smash themselves." Eddie gave a snort before tilting his head to the left, resting in Richie's right hand. Richie leaned in closer, their noses touching. "Can't get rid of me that easily, Kaspbrak."

Eddie gave a small nod before closing the distance. It was a long, firm kiss. Richie sighed, closing his eyes and chasing back for another when Eddie ended it too quickly. He did his best to make the kiss not seem like a goodbye. Because it wasn't. Richie would make sure of it.

When they pulled back, they kept their foreheads together. They breathed in each other's breath, exhaling out the stifled tears. Richie broke the stillness by saying, "And I could never leave Mrs. Kaspbrak alone for too long—someone has to keep her satisfied."

Eddie groaned and pushed him. "Beep fucking beep, Trashmouth," he said, stuffing his face into Richie's shoulder. Richie sniggered, letting his arms drape over Eddie and placing his hands on his back. Eddie mumbled, "You better write every week."

"Every day."

"And call me. And the others."

"As much as I can."

Eddie nodded into his neck, bringing his hands up to clasp Richie's t-shirt. In the stillness of the kitchen, with a room full of sleeping teens across the hall, the boys sat in silence, embracing, letting themselves for a moment forget the oncoming departure. Forget the struggles of long-distance relationships. Forget the tortures of hiding from the world outside that small house. And for a moment they were simply lovers, holding each other.

.....

They arrived at the bus station in Portland on time. The boys helped Richie put his minimal possessions into the Greyhound.

Deborah made sure Richie had all his proper paperwork and that his ticket was paid for and correct.

Before he could step onto the bus, Richie grabbed his mom's Polaroid camera and made Deborah take a picture of them all together. Richie stood in the center, squinting so he could see. Ben was already crying, his face blotchy and red. Bill's stutter was terrible, Stan's lip was trembling, and Mike kept making forced, toothy smiles. Eddie clutched at Richie's clothes, his arms. At anything he could grab.

The photo was pretty terrible.

Richie took it and placed it in his back pocket.

He gave each one a hug—even Deborah. She gasped, mumbled something about how this was inappropriate, and then hugged him back.

At the call of the bus driver, Richie stepped onto the vehicle, turning back only once to flip off his friends and call them all losers.

He sat down, and the bus left for Buffalo.

Notes for the Chapter:

this is the last of the losers for a little bit. now, both the separate scenes, in Indiana and in Maine, are going to start merging together.

Also I've never really written romance before??? I usually write either very childish writing (i want to write kids books for a living) or very very dark writing. But romance? Never done that before.

i hope that scene read alright.

7. Chapter Seven: All I see is all I know

Notes for the Chapter:

I return. How is everyone doing?

update on me- i got some grades back for my 8 week courses and guess who still has her 4.0 heyoooooooo its me (validate me, i put my self worth in my grades)

Also I have no idea if you guys want this or not, but I'm gonna include a list in the notes of all the songs the chapter titles are coming from. They're all Bowie lyrics.

Anyway, thank you all for the amazing comments!

Karen arrived at the hotel in Buffalo at 7:22 in the evening exactly. With a long, tired sigh, she parked the car and turned off the engine. It had been possibly the longest 10 hours of her life. Karen had greatly underestimated the amount of time and energy it would take to drive such a distance, and her back and neck ached. She attempted to rub out the stiffness, rolling her neck. Slouching in her seat, she allowed her eyes to drift shut and for her arms to relax. Then, with a quick slap on her legs, she opened the car door, grabbed her overnight bag from the trunk, and checked into the hotel.

Karen asked the bored check-in girl if there was a phone she could use. The girl smacked her gum twice before gesturing to a pay phone with a short wave of her pointer finger. Karen gave a stiff-lipped "Thank you," before walking to the phone. She put in 50 cents for a 10 minute call and dialed home. It rang three times before someone picked up the receiver.

"Wheeler residence, this is Nancy speaking," spoke the voice. Karen's fingers played with the metal cord.

"Nancy? Its mom."

Karen heard a small thump from the other line. A muffled sound of voices came, and then a quick and loud, "Everyone shut up," before the line became clear again. Karen heard one single knock against the

phone before Nancy's voice sounded.

"Sorry, Will just got here and the boys have been running around being stupid," she said, the latter part of the sentence once again raising in volume. Karen heard the distant voice of Mike yelling back. Nancy muffled the phone, this time less successfully. Karen clearly heard her scream, "Shut up, mom is on the phone," and then return to her phone voice, saying, "How was the drive?"

Karen sighed a little as she spoke, "Long. I just checked into the hotel."

"But you made time—you told me 8 o'clock." Karen could picture the say Nancy was sitting, her arm resting on the table and her fingers drumming lightly. Karen fiddled with the cord.

"Did the boys vacuum Richard's room? And wash the sheets?"

Nancy responded, "Yeah, and I made him clean the rest of the house too." Karen was going to thank her when another call from Mike came, and Nancy didn't bother covering the receiver before bellowing, "I did so help you! I swept the kitchen and made dinner—that's not nothing." Karen held the payphone an inch away from her ear as Nancy continued to yell at her brother. When the shouting lessened, Karen took her chance to end the call.

"Nancy, I need to go—I have to bring my bags up to the room."

"Oh—okay mom."

"Alright? I'll call you again when I have Richard. His bus is supposed to arrive around 9."

Nancy gave a brief goodbye, and Karen hung up the receiver. With shoulders slumped and her eyes closed, she gave a heavy exhale. She let her head rest on the cool of the payphone before a new customer came into the hotel, asking for a room. Karen lifted her head, brushed a hair back into place, and grabbed her bag, taking the elevator to the second floor.

When Karen entered the hotel room, she was greeted by a small suite with two twin beds, both with pristine, white blankets tucked tightly

into the mattress. Karen dropped her bag before sitting on the bed, checking the spring slightly before falling back with a loud sigh. It was then, once again by herself, that the constant motion of the day caught up to her. It was in the stillness of her quiet hotel room that Karen realized how heavy her eyelids were and how comfortable a freshly made bed was. "Just a quick nap," she whispered, pushing herself further up the mattress, her head finding a plush, feather pillow. Karen's exhausted mind reasoned with her, convincing the tired woman that she had time for a quick rest and then a bite to eat before her nephew arrived. And with a comfortable, drained sigh, Karen closed her eyes.

.....

Richie tugged his head phones off, the batteries in his Walkman finally dying. He rolled stiff shoulders and twitched bored fingers. With a tic of his lip and a rub of his nose, he looked around him at the other passengers. Few were the same people who boarded the bus with him in Portland, most having departed at the stop in Boston and New York City. Behind him sat an older woman who was knitting with quick, skilled hands. She had been sitting in the same spot the whole ride, focused on her project. Richie chewed on his lower lip as he studied the motion of her fingers. Her knuckles were rounded and her skin leathery as she shifted her hands rapidly, knitting and purling. Richie's fingers started to copy the motions, his pointer outstretched like it was taught with green yarn. "What you making," he asked, resting his chin on the back of the seat. Its chipping plastic dug a little into his skin.

The rhythm didn't falter as she answered, "Socks."

Richie eyed the yarn. "Who are you going to torture with itchy-ass yarn socks?"

The woman raised an eyebrow, "I don't think that's any of your business." She sniffed. "Whys a kid like you been on a bus since Portland?" Her wrinkled eyes gazed at him from behind large spectacles.

Richie responded with a curt, "Well, I don't think that's any of your business." He gave her a crooked smile. Her lips stayed pursed.

“How did you get that shiner?”

“You should see the other guy,” Richie answered, lifting his chin from the seat. He picked at his fingers.

The woman stopped knitting for a moment to raise her head, her eyes tracing the bruises and the stitches. Richie saw sympathy pass on her face, and he clenched his hands.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

Richie turned around on his seat to look right at her. He said, “I don’t know, shouldn’t you be in a nursing home? Or dead?”

Her mouth was open in shock. Richie shook his head. “Hey, it was just a joke. Don’t hit me with your oxygen tank or something.” With a loud sniff and pinched lips, the woman rose from her seat to leave. “Wait, is the interview over?” he asked, raising his arms as if to grab the woman as she shimmied out of the seat, yarn and needles in hand, and walked to an open seat in the front of the bus. Richie let out a laugh through his nose before turning back in his seat. He saw the old woman give him one long, disapproving glare before straightening and going back to her knitting. Richie let his head hit the window, and he watched the trees go by as best as his poor eyes would let him. He had seen a sign for Buffalo earlier. He would be there soon. In mere minutes.

Shifting, Richie reached back and grabbed the photo in his back pocket. It was now wrinkled on the edges, but it still showed the image of his friends with their arms around him. He straightened out a fold on the upper right corner. He studied their faces—the curls on Stan’s head, the shadows on Ben’s face, the tears on Eddie’s cheeks. With a small sigh, he eyed the old woman before muttering to himself. “Beep beep, you fucking Trashmouth.”

.....

When the bus arrived, Richie was quick to get off and stretch his legs. He landed on the asphalt with solid feet and took a dramatic inhale and exhale. “Hey, it doesn’t smell like cows or anything in Buffalo,” he said to no one in particular. With his backpack on one shoulder,

his duffel on the other, and his box of records in his hands, he made his way inside the station. Riche was welcomed to a few late-night people, some taking naps, some reading books. A few folks greeted the exiting passengers, arms wide with anticipation of hugs. Richie saw the old woman crouch down to hug a small girl. The woman next to the girl watched with a content smile as the little girl gave the old woman a kiss on her cheek. The old woman grinned.

Arms straining and ribs aching, Richie gently placed his box on a seat and removed his bags, putting them down on top of the box. He searched the room, looking for a face he should remember. He remembered his aunt's brown eyes. Her curly hair. Her kind eyes. He saw nothing.

Richie pinched his brows and sniffed. With a quick brush of his nose and a squint of his eyes, he did his best to make out some distant faces, but only saw unfamiliar, fuzzy features. Worry crept its way under Richie's skin, and he felt his fingers twitch and his hearing heighten. With a small, short breath, Richie sat down next to his belongings. As the old woman and her relatives left the building, her hands clasped with the little girl's, Richie scratched at his jeans, picking at the sporadic holes that Eddie always told him to patch. He took a deep inhale before leaning back on the seat, trying to look relaxed. With stiff shoulders and throbbing ribs, Richie sighed, looked around once more, and then raised his sleeve and checked his watch.

It read 9:23.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title songs include:

- 1- Life on Mars
- 2- Oh, You Pretty Things
- 3- Moonage Daydream
- 4- Changes
- 5- Five Years
- 6- Space Oddity
- 7- Sons of the Silent Age

I highly recommend listening to all of them, because they are all brilliant.

I know this whole fic is surrounded by Bowie music,

but I really think that Richie is perfectly personified by the Ramones first album. Super up tempo songs with darker messages. I've been working on expanding my vinyl collection, and I just got that album, so i've been listening to it a whole lot. They are even super short, so they fit Richie's short attention span as well. Good stuff.

Also the song Cough Syrup by Young the Giant :)
(also poor rich i torture you so)

8. Chapter Eight: Pale blinds drawn all day

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks everyone for your patience! school keeps beating me up and keeping me from enjoying life.
here is a little update that I don't really like, but decided to keep.
hope you enjoy and thank you for all the comments!

It was a thump that woke her. The wall shook for a moment as the neighboring hotel room became alive with movement. Karen's heavy eyes struggled to lift as muffled words made their way into her room. The mumbles quickly hushed with what sounded like a short scold, and soon the rhythms of life settled. Karen stretched her back, letting out a crack, and sat up. Scratching her eye, she let out a small, contained, polite yawn, covering her mouth with her hand. Her stomach let out a loud gurgle, and she scrunched her face. Calmly, she wondered where the nearest fast-food restaurant was, since that was probably all she could get before going to pick up Richard.

Richard.

Gasping, Karen darted to the bedside table, snatching the alarm clock with two hands.

It read 1:13 AM.

"Shit," Karen yelled. She grabbed her purse, shoved her shoes on, and only stopped to find her room keys before running out the door. Tripping slightly down steps, Karen ran through the dimly lit lobby, past the girl who smacked her gum and gave a lackluster call not to run in the lobby. Karen unlocked her Volkswagen, throwing her purse to the passenger seat. "Shit, shit, shit," she mumbled, turning on the ignition with a quick twist of her wrist. Then, she sped out of the parking lot and onto the road, following the road signs to the bus station, cursing under her breath with every turn. She sped through yellow lights, ignoring honks from passing cars, until she spotted the entrance for the station. Karen slammed on her breaks, made a sharp right turn into the parking lot, and parked, her back end halfway into

the next spot.

Grasping in purse, she ran inside the building, her hair misplaced and her face red. She scanned the room, seeing sleep-deprived patrons sitting in wait for a night bus. It was in the corner by a window that she spotted him. She recognized the dark, curly hair that reminded her so much of her father. With quick quiet steps, she made her way to the corner and crouched down beside her nephew. He was sitting with his head on top of his box, his two bags placed on his lap. Karen watched him take a deep breath, his back raising and falling. Furrowing her brows, she silently looked around for his other boxes before scooting closer to him and placing a gentle hand on his back. She shook him with slow back and forth movements and whispered, "Richard, wake up," over and over. With a twitch of his brow and a slight sniff, he raised his head, peaking one eye open to look at her.

"Hey, Auntie Karen," he said, his voice gravelly. He took his head off of the box, curving his spine and cracking his back. He gave a dramatic yawn, before letting the air out of his lungs in a single huff. Karen saw the face revealed in front of her smiling and covered in bruises. The bandage on his cheek was coming up on the edges and his lip was severely split. Richard gave a small twist of his shoulder and winced at the movement.

"Oh Richard," she said before taking him into her arms. She forced herself not to squeeze his broken body, awkwardly brushing his hair and leaning over his bags. "I'm so sorry—I fell asleep the second I got to the hotel."

Richard patted her back in rhythmic beats. "Well, sleep is important."

Karen withdrew from the hug, her hands resting on his shoulders. She brushed some curly hair from Richard's forehead, taking note of the stiff shoulders and short breath that resulted from the touch. She rubbed his shoulders with soft strokes before standing. "Come on, let's get to the hotel." She picked up the duffle on his lap. "We need to grab the rest of your stuff."

Richard stood, rolling his shoulders before swinging his backpack on and lifting the cardboard box. "This is it," he said, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Karen pinched her brow, her lips pursed. She did

her best not to let her horror show on her face. Richard raised an eyebrow. "What, it's not like I could take my bed with me." He walked past Karen as she clutched her purse. "Lead the way, Auntie Karen—I can't see shit without my glasses."

Karen did her best not to flinch at the curse. *Don't start scolding him now, Karen. Not after the mercy he just gave you.* She followed after him with hurried steps, taking him to the car.

.....

Richie found the morning cozied up in warm sheets. He dreaded having to leave the bed, rarely feeling the comfort of tight, freshly made bed sheets practically hugging him. He twitched his lip and stuffed his face into the feather pillow, making a silent promise that he would make his bed more often. He knew it was a weak promise.

Before he and Karen headed out for the long drive to Hawkins, Karen had to make a phone call. Richie sat on the floor beside her, pretending not to eavesdrop on her conversation with Ted. "Yes, he's fine," she said more than once, her voice soft and reassuring. She kept glancing down at him, her fingers fiddling with the cord, pausing only when she spoke hushed whispers. "He's got bruises all over his face, Ted—how do you think he looks?" Richie hunched his shoulders before rubbing his nose and standing. With casual steps, he approached the woman at the front desk. She stood, leaning on the counter with her chin in her hand. She acknowledged Richie with an eye roll.

"You need something, bar fight?" the girl asked, tapping her fingers.

"Can I bum a cig?" Richie responded. The girl gave him a side eye before shrugging and reaching into her back pocket and offering one of her Kools. Richie lit it there in the lobby, taking one long drag before letting out the smoke, winking at the woman, and turning around on one foot. He shoved the door open with his shoulder, ignored the pain that shot through him, and stood on the sidewalk. With a hand in his back pocket, fiddling with the photo of his friends, Richie took in a single breath of fresh air before returning his cigarette to his mouth. Eddie would hate to know that Richie blew through a whole pack of cigarettes on the bus ride to Buffalo. Richie

sighed, scratching the back of his head as the cig hung from his lips. He would probably rant about yellow teeth and lung cancer, his volume raising when he got to talking about iron lungs or something. Richie gave a shallow laugh.

“Richard?” came the voice of his aunt. She stood stiff, her eyes focused on the cigarette dangling in Richie’s pointer and middle finger. He looked her in the eye as he brought it back up to his mouth and took a final short puff.

“Richie,” he said. Karen raised her eyebrows. “Call me Richie. The only people that call me Richard are like—,” he dropped the cigarette and crushed it under his sneaker, “—principles or social workers or something.” Richie eyed his aunt, watching her shift back and forth. He gave a small sniff.

“Phone call done?” Karen nodded. Richie gave a single, loud clap. “Alright, let’s do this.” He made his way to the Volkswagen and opened the driver’s side door with a dramatic, gentlemanly gesture. Karen gave a small thank you before sliding into her seat. Richie tapped the hood as he walked around to the passenger side.

Once seated, Richie immediately started playing with the radio. Karen placed both hands on the steering wheel, clenching and unclenching on the leather. “Richie,” she said. “I would like—I want,” she fumbled before letting out a small sigh. She sat straight, posture confident as she said, “I want you to stop smoking.”

Richie raised an eyebrow, lips turning in a smirk. With a breath he said, “Well, we all want things, don’t we.”

Karen pursed her lips and exited the parking lot.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song- Sound and vision

Apparently in Indiana, the legal age for purchasing cigarettes was 16 until 1987 when it was bumped up to 18. (take that with a grain of salt-- Wikipedia is

my source.) I don't want to gloss over how unhealthy and terrible smoking is for your body, but it feels appropriate to me for Richie's character for him to smoke a decent amount. It was so common back then-- I mean in *Stranger Things* Hopper and Joyce are smoking in almost every scene.

Anyway what did you think of Richie's sass? What are your plans for Easter (if any)? how are your lives?

Thank you so much for reading!

9. Chapter Nine: Looking sweet though he dresses like a queen

Notes for the Chapter:

What is this??? She's posting less than a week after the last update?? this is unheard of! Preposterous!

I paced myself better with homework last week, so I actually had time to write! So here's a little chapter for you guys.

Its sort of filler, but i liked writing it. I'm trying to get better at writing Richie's dialog, so I used this chapter as a sort of practice chapter. Anyway, enjoy!

“Okay so right here—this guy on the left. That’s my main man Stan,” Richie said, waving his photo in front of Karen’s face. They had finally stopped for a late lunch in Ohio after driving far too long in between meals. The pulled over at a small diner a few towns outside of Cleveland, and both Richie and Karen were grateful for the chance to stretch their legs and look at something other than corn fields for a moment. Richie shoved a handful of fries in his mouth and continued, “He’s a total science nerd and is gonna marry a fucking bird or something.” Karen took a small sip of burnt coffee, watching the enthusiasm in Richie’s crinkled eyes and upturned lips. “The tall, model lookin’ one is Bill. He’s the smartest stutterer across the seven seas. The chunk-master Ben is as soft and cuddly as he looks.” Karen let a breathy laugh escape her lips. Richie looked up from the photo, his cheeks full of fries, before saying, “The one who is crying way too much is Eds. Jesus, he looks so shitty in this picture but he is the single cutest person alive.” Richie paused for a second tilting his head to the side as he studied the image. “He’d fucking slug me for calling him that,” he said with a smile. Karen decided not to interrupt with a comment about the curses, since Richie appeared to be on a roll. Richie put on a commentator voice as he said, “Now, last but certainly not least is Mr. tall-dark-and-handsome, Mike Hanlon. He is way too cool to hang out with us losers. Don’t know how we managed to knock him down the social ladder.”

Richie handed the photo over to Karen who took it with gentle

fingers, folding out a few creases. The image showed the group of boys squished together, their faces with grimaced, forced smiles and their eyes full of tears. Two of the boys looked like they weren't even trying to hold back, their faces damp and blotchy. Riche gave a loud gasp before digging through his duffel. "I have more pictures in here," he said as he pulled out his medications that he had to take with food. They were the only reason he brought in his duffel, but it ended up becoming an introduction of some of Richie's prized possessions. He had pulled out the Polaroid camera with a flourish, saying that it belonged to his mother. Karen commented on how nice it was of her sister to give it to him, and he gave a sarcastic remark about how kind people are when they don't know someone is taking their things. Karen didn't even have time to comment before Richie took the photo of his friends together out of his back pocket.

"Wait-wait-wait, that one doesn't have Bev in it," he said, rummaging around the laundry in his bag. He exclaimed a loud, "There you are, you little fucker," and whipped out a small envelope. Richie thumbed his way through the envelope while Karen hushed him, her eyes darting around the diner. An older man with three small kids looked at the two of them, appalled.

"Right here," Richie said, ignoring Karen's pleas for him to lower his voice. He gave her a photo of him on a couch with a girl in his arms. She had short, red hair with curls that rivaled Richie's own. "That little lady is the amazing, talented, and beautiful Beverly Marsh. Portland resident badass." He found another photo and handed it to Karen. In it, he and Beverly are both wearing boas and draping themselves against a wall, sunglasses on and cigarettes in hand. Again, Richie had his arm around her shoulder. Karen raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, in that one we raided the drama club's costumes." He leaned on the table so he could see the photo in her hands. "We look pretty slick, don't we?"

Karen gave him a little nod, a small smile on her lips. "So Beverly couldn't see you off with the others?"

"Nah, she couldn't use another sick day at school. Her aunt has been getting tougher on her since she got detention for ditching and coming to see us after New Year's." Karen furrowed her brow and slid the photo back to Richie. He gave it one more look before putting it

back in his envelope. Karen watched as he carefully tucked it in, sealing the envelope back up.

“We’ll have to try and have her visit,” Karen said. She did her best to read the smile on his face to figure out just how close the girl was to her nephew. If the shine in his eyes was an indication of excitement, then Karen’s inkling was leaning toward correct.

“We need to have the whole gang over—we can have a giant ass camp fire and tip some cows or shit,” Richie started bouncing in his seat.

“Cows? Richie—we live in the suburbs.”

Groaning, he flapped his hands, “What is this— and here I thought you had a fucking soy bean farm with a bunch of animals.” He gave a look of mock sadness while Karen shushed him once more, her eyes darting back to the old man who looked about ready to complain to the staff. Karen mouthed an apology before turning back to Richie. She picked at her salad for a moment before rummaging in her own bag, pulling out her wallet.

Placing two school photos in front of Richie, Karen said, “Here is Nancy now.” Nancy sat smiling, her teeth white and her hair perfectly braided. Richie squinted before snatching the picture and bringing it closer to his face.

“Ah, good ol’ Nance,” Richie nodded before giving the photo back.

“And here is Mike. You remember little Mike, right?” She gave him his school photo. Mike had made such a stink when he got the photo back, thinking it made him look like a frog. Karen thought he looked smart in his tan sweater vest and blue jacket. Richie let out a small laugh.

“Look at little Jiminy Cricket.” Karen frowned. “Where is your top hat, little guy?” Karen took back the photo, sliding it back into her wallet.

While Richie resumed shoving fries into his mouth, Karen shifted in her seat. “Richie,” she said, sitting straight and placing her hands in

her lap. “Before we get home, I want to discuss some house rules.”

Richie swallowed his fries, and leaned forward, placing his hands under his chin and a smile on his face. “Oh, please, continue,” he responded. Karen gave a small sigh.

“So, the basic house rules—go to school, do your homework, no girls in your room,” he raised an eyebrow, “we have a sit-down dinner every night and I expect you to be there unless told otherwise.” Richie pursed his lips and nodded.

“Seems reasonable,” he said, pushing a fry back and forth. Karen nodded.

“And I would really appreciate it if you cut back on the swearing—Ted doesn’t like hearing language like that in the house.”

Richie sat up straight and saluted, “Yes, drill sergeant.” Karen stared at him, giving her best I-am-the-adult-so-you-need-to-listen face. She raised her eyebrows, kept her eyes focused on him. Richie returned the challenging stare for a moment before curling his shoulders and leaning forward.

“Relax, Auntie. I can reign in the language and be home for dinner on time.” He picked up another fry. “When it comes to food, I’ll always be there.” She gave him a tight-lipped smile. Richie ate the fry and pushed his empty plate to the side while Karen took a sip of her coffee.

“And with the girls in my room, you really don’t have to worry about that,” Richie said.

Before Karen could answer, the waiter brought over their check. Karen asked him if he accepted credit cards and slipped her card out of her wallet. Once the bill was paid and their stomachs full, they slumped back into the car and continued the tiring journey to Hawkins.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter song title- All the young dudes

I debated whether or not to make Richie's last

comment into a masturbation joke, (I was gonna have him say, "you don't have to worry about that--I'm in a fully committed relationship with my right hand") but decided to leave it as a hint to his sexuality. Next chapter, they will finally arrive in Hawkins. How do you think Mike will react to Richie's interesting personality? Or Nancy?

Thanks so much for reading and sticking with y inconsistent schedule!

10. Chapter Ten: The multitude of faces, honest, rich and clean

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter gave me a lot of trouble, but I guess this is as good as it'll get.
also hello welcome back to inconsistent updating schedule.

Mike slouched on the couch, absently watching the television his father had put on before instantly falling asleep. His stomach raised and lowered as low, snoring inhales and exhales left body. Nancy sat up in her bedroom, doing whatever she did up there, and Mike was left to watch Holly. The girl sat near the window, switching between brushing her doll's hair and staring out into the dark.

It was late and their mother would be home soon.

Mike shifted, looking at his digital watch. 8:04 PM. They could pull up any minute. Mike rubbed his palms on his jeans before standing to get a glass of water from the kitchen. Once away from the television, he was surrounded by silence. Leaning against the fridge, he closed his eyes, straining his ears to hear Holly's childish mumbles over his father's snores. With a sigh, he drummed his fingers on the cool of the fridge before speaking. "Eleven—sorry I left my walkie-talkie in the base—," he paused, "—in my new room." Mike scratched his eye. "Mom is coming home with my cousin today. Nancy said that mom said that he couldn't drive 'cause his glasses got smashed or something, so Mom is probably going to be pissy when she gets home." He walked over to the cabinet, grabbed a glass and filled it with tap water. "That or dead on her feet." He took a sip and placed the glass on the counter. "It's gonna be weird having someone other than you living in the house." Mike poured his leftover water down the drain when he heard Holly drop her doll. Mike left the kitchen to see Holly standing at the window, both hands on the glass.

"She's here—I'll try to sneak and see you tomorrow, okay?" he said, looking around the room like he was waiting for Eleven to walk out

of the closet. Mike heard pounding as Nancy rushed down the stairs before picking up Holly and shoving Ted awake. Ted gave one final snort before sniffing and adjusting his glasses. Pushing off the chair, he stood in between Nancy and Mike, hands on their shoulders like an uncomfortable family photo. Nancy adjusted Holly on her hip when the girl squirmed and mumbled about getting down. They heard the car door slam, and both Mike and Nancy tensed. Ted's hold on their shoulders tightened. With a click and a turn of the doorknob, the front door opened.

Karen walked in carrying a duffel bag and with a backpack swung over her left shoulder. "Hey everyone," she said, bags under her eyes and her usually pristine hair tossed in a high ponytail. She turned back to outside before saying, "Richie—you need help with that."

"Relax, Auntie. I'm not some invalid," came the voice. It was loud and laughing. Mike and Nancy shared a look.

Karen's face had a tired smile as Richard walked into the house. Mike's first thought was *Jesus, he's tall* before noticing the blotchy bruises on his face. He was carrying a cardboard box and shifted it in his arms as he stood in front of the group. He arched his eyebrows. "Aw you all came out to meet me?" He adjusted the box, "Well gee willikers, you guys are making me blush." Mike furrowed his brow.

Karen ignored Richard's comment to say, "Everyone, this is Richie. Richie, here's Nancy, Holly, Mike, and your uncle Ted." Ted left the kid's side to place a hand on the boy's shoulder. Mike noticed Richie's eye twitch.

"It's good to see you again, Richard."

Richie looked him up and down before pursing his lips. With a hint of sarcasm he said, "Oh, the pleasure is all mine, Uncle Teddy."

Ted responded, "Here, let me take this up to your room—Mike." Mike slouched. "Take these bags upstairs to Richard's room. Nancy can help get the rest from the car." Rolling his eyes, Mike snatched this box from Richie's hands, ignoring Richie's wide eyes and smirk at Mike's poor attitude. Nancy put Holly on the ground, but the girl remained by her leg, sucking on a lock of hair. While Mike got the

two bags from Karen so he could make it in one trip, Richie stretched his back, putting his arms up above his head.

Karen whispered to Nancy, “There are no other bags.”

Nancy whispered back, “That’s it?” Karen nodded. Mike swung the bags over his shoulder. Mike turned to see Richie crouched to the ground. He was tilting his head, looking at Holly. “Now, you must be little Holly wolly, eh?” The girl hid her face behind Nancy’s leg. He pursed his lips, “Oh I see, I see. Is it the bruises?” He pointed at his face. Mike saw his mother and father stiffen from the corner of his eye. “You wanna know how I got them?” The girl peaked from the fabric on Nancy’s leg. Richie nodded, “It was Oscar the Grouch.”

Holly furrowed her light eyebrows. “Oscar?” she said.

“Yup. Oscar. I accidentally knocked over his trashcan and he was not very happy about it.” Richie rocked back and forth on his heels.

She let go of Nancy’s pants, playing with her hair. “You’ve been to Sesame Street?”

“Oh yeah, I go there all the time—me and Big Bird—we go way back.” He gave her a crooked smile that Holly returned.

“Can I go?”

“Well, I think you’d have to ask Auntie Karen about that.”

Holly trotted up to Karen, pulling on her shirt. “Mommy, can I go? Can I go to Sesame Street?”

Karen chuckled and brushed the girl’s bangs to the side. “Not tonight, honey. It’s almost bed time.” Holly pouted as Richie stood up straight with a wince. He rolled his shoulders before turning to Mike.

“Lead the way, Jiminy Cricket.” Mike crinkled his face. Nancy gave a small snort and Mike whipped his head to give her a glare before rushing up the stairs. Mike got the top of the steps, turning on one foot to look back at Richie. He was halfway up, leaning on the railing for a moment.

“Hurry up,” Mike said.

Richie looked up at him with raised eyebrows. “Excuse me, how many bruised ribs do you have?” Mike stood stiff. “That’s what I thought.” Richie took a breath before standing straight and making the rest of the flight up the stairs. When they made it to Mike’s old bedroom, Mike put his box on the desk and casually threw Richie’s bags onto the ground. Richie came in behind him, hands in his pockets. He squinted at the room, looking at the newly blank walls and vacuumed floors. Mike stood back as Richie walked past him to the bed. He sat down, tested the bounce a little, and then flopped back onto the mattress. He immediately pulled the blankets undone from their neatly tucked corners and rolled the comforters up around him. He gave a loud sigh before saying, “This is so fucking cozy.”

Mike stood silent, looking around and shifting from foot to foot. Richie crawled up to the pillow before stuffing his face in it. “Oh shit this is so soft—is this feathers? Its feathers, right?” Mike shrugged. “I bet it is full of like, fucking goose feathers or something.” He shoved his face back in the pillow. Mike looked to the open door, wondering if escape was alright. He edged toward the door.

“Word for the wise, don’t ever forget to ice your ribs on a 10 hour long car ride. Everything will hurt.”

Mike mumbled, “You’re the wise?” under his breath. Richie took the blanket off his face, a slight smile on his face.

“Oof, got me good there, Mr. Cricket.” Mike frowned.

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

Richie raised an eyebrow, “Because you look like a fucking bug.” Mike clenched his hands. “Hey, look at this,” Richie paused, rolling over on the bed a few times. He stopped, peeking out from behind the blanket. “I’m a burrito,” he said, giggling. Mike stared at him for a moment before huffing and turning out of the room. He heard a call from his bedroom, but he ignored it, rushing down the steps and rounding the corner.

In the kitchen, Karen stood, nursing a glass of wine. She asked, “Is

Richie all settled?” Mike stared at her for a second, looking at her behind furrowed eyebrows and a scowl. He grunted and stomped away from her, down to the basement. He grabbed his walkie-talkie, slumped down onto his bed, and turning the walkie-talkie on to channel 12.

“El—my cousin just got here and he’s so fucking annoying.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter song title—God knows I’m good

What did you think? Do you like Mike talking to El?
What about Richie's burrito? Do you think this
chapter is as weak as I think it is? Let me know!

11. Chapter Eleven: The hangman plays the mandolin

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for your patience with the updating. I have two more courses to take and then I have my BA! I'm almost done, and its crunch time right now. Taking the nontraditional route and doing school online definitely has its perks, but it is still as demanding as normal, on-campus schooling (I've done both)

I hope you enjoy this chapter! I am slowly starting to get these character situated before we start going on to other parts of the story. it will be a little bit, so bear with me.

Also, totally random side note-- I watched Love, Simon this week, and I am still not over it. I read Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda like 3 years ago, and was super stoked when I heard they were making a movie off of it. And that movie. Killed me. I was crying for like an hour after watching it. Everyone should watch it, but especially little queer kids.

it was an important movie
anyway, side note over- enjoy!

When Mike ran away from Richie, he gave one feeble call before sinking into the mattress, letting out a long exhale. He laid straight, rolled up in blankets and bed sheets. With one quick breath, Richie sat up, turning to his bags to unpack. On the bedside table he placed his Polaroid and photos, as well as his toothbrush that he had neglected to use since leaving Maine. He dumped the rest of the contents on the floor, watching is old t shirts and jeans flooded out of the bag. Richie bent down to pick up his other bag, wincing as he felt a pinch in his ribs. The shirts in the other bag joined the others, and soon the floor resembled the unkempt carpet of his old bedroom. Richie raised his head, squinting his eyes. The walls were blank except for a single poster. It appeared to be image of Star Wars.

Richie could just make out the picture of Luke's shining light saber held above his head with Leia draped around his waist. Richie tilted his head at the picture. "Who left this display of incest up in my room," he said to no one.

Richie rubbed his nose lightly, rocking back and forth on his heels. There were quiet murmurs hovering in the house. It made Richie twitch. He studied the room, seeing the light blue walls and watching the blurred curtains sway with a small breeze. He shuffled over to the window, leaning on the glass. It was only slightly open, letting in a gentle rhythm of cool wind from the outside. The decline of the roof outside was not too steep. Good enough for steady, solid footing. Richie nodded. He could get out that way if he needed to.

With slow steps, Richie made his way down the steps, hanging on the railing. He walked on the carpeted stairs with care, feeling the plush carpet on his feet. It was soft and slippery. The railing was smooth, free of chips and sticky residue. Richie traced the grain of the wood with a finger. Back at his house, the railings always felt tacky, like something sugary had been spilled and evaporated on the wood. Beer probably. Sometimes wine. Richie gripped tighter on the railing.

Once at the bottom, he patted Holly's head, passing her quickly to reach the kitchen. The little girl followed his heel, trotting loudly after him. In the kitchen, Karen was seated at the counter, a glass of wine next to her and what looked like a quick microwave meal. She picked at the meal with her fork, clearly too tired to eat but doing her best to get some nutrients in. Richie eyed the glass. It had been a while since he'd actually seen wine in a fancy glass and not just in a bottle. He picked at the hem of his shirt.

"Hey Auntie," he said. She turned her head to him, her under eyes a deep shade of purple.

"You getting settled, Richie?" she asked, a drowsy smile turning the corners of her lips. Richie shifted his weight between his feet.

"Doing my best. Where did Mikey go? I think one of his posters is up in my room." Karen rested her chin in her hand before lightly grasping her glass and taking a small sip. She placed it back on the counter, still an inch of wine in her glass. He watched it spin in the

glass, the liquid settling slowly.

“He’s in his bedroom downstairs,” she answered. “You should sleep. We have to go to the eye doctor early tomorrow morning.” Riche pursed his lips and nodded. She took a bite of her microwaved rice. “Also, Holly—its way past your bedtime.” Holly hid behind Richie’s leg, grasping the seams of his jeans and twisting them between her fingers. Karen raised from her seat and picked up the girl, who immediately started to pout and squirm. Richie observed as Karen brushed her bangs and soothed her with motherly affection. She brought the girl up stairs, still quieting her objections with soft, sleepy words.

Richie opened a few closets in his search for the basement. They were all organized and clean, everything evenly placed and not overly crowded. Once he found the basement door, he slowly walked down the steps, making the old wood creak with his weight. He found a large room full of folded chairs and old sofas, with a pull out bed in the center. The walls were covered in posters like the one in Richie’s room, him noticing the outline of the Ghostbuster’s logo on one of the walls. Mike was laying on the mattress with what looked like a walkie talkie on his stomach. The boy gave a grunt when he saw Richie. “What are you doing—this is MY room.” Mike sat up, adjusting his pillow.

Richie gestured to the device. “Who you talking to?”

Mike shot back, “None of your business.”

Richie raised an eyebrow. “Ohoo, you got a nerd girlfriend?” He saw red paint Mike’s face.

“I said it’s none of your business.”

“Yeah yeah, well keep your little conversations PG—I don’t need to hear horny middle school phone sex.”

“Shut up!” Mike yelled, raising to his knees. He visibly shook, his hands clenched at his sides. Richie gave a short snicker.

“Hey—did you leave a poster up in my room?” Mike stayed quiet,

glaring up at Richie behind his eyebrows. Richie continued, “There’s an old Star Wars poster on the wall—can I just rip it down or do you want to keep it?”

Mike’s eyes widened, “Don’t rip it down. Just—just take it down—gently.”

“Okie dokie, kiddo.” Mike still sat on his knees, his hands forcefully clenched. If he had been holding a pillow, he probably would have thrown it at Richie already. Richie giggled.

Tilting his head and leaning on the railing, he asked, “So, what did you think of that twist?” Mike eyed him, confused. “You know—Luke and Leia being siblings.”

Mike shrugged his shoulders, looking around the room. “I was surprised,” he said after a moment. “It was unexpected.”

Richie nodded, “Yeah, it was—but Leia was already into Han and Luke is so obviously gay, so it doesn’t matter that much.”

Mike stared at Richie, eyes wide and horrified. “What?”

Richie shrugged, “Shit, I guess it does matter, since Leia can definitely use the force now like Luke, but—”

“Luke is not gay. Don’t—don’t be weird.” Richie pursed his lips, popping them once.

“Weird?”

“That’s gross.” Richie crossed his arms, drumming his fingers.

“What—more gross than fucking making out with your sister?”

Mike crinkled his nose, “No, but—”

Richie smiled, “Do you regularly kiss your sister like that? Cause that is way worse than juvenile phone sex—I’ll take that over—”

“JESUS STOP,” Mike shouted, reaching back to grab a pillow.

From the stairs they heard a shout of, “QUIET DOWN THERE MIKE,” from Ted, successfully quieting the boys. They remained silent for a moment, hearing Karen and Ted have a small conversation. Karen must have scolded him for raising his voice and potentially waking up Holly. Richie let out a giggle, and Mike grumbled and flopped back on the mattress. Richie eyed him, watching Mike mumble under his breath.

“I’d rather be a mister kisser than a sister kisser—you’re nasty, cricket.”

Mike threw the pillow at Richie’s face, his face fiery red. He gave another laugh, this one loud and from his stomach. When another pillow was aimed in his direction, Richie fled up the stairs, wincing and laughing as he went. Mike yelled after him something about staying out of his room before letting out a loud groan. At the top of the stairs, Richie closed the basement door, still giggling.

Letting out a laughing sigh, he turned to see Nancy looking at him, her eyebrows furrowed. She pursed her lips, giving him a look of slight annoyance. She said, “Don’t egg him on—he’s already high strung enough as it is.” Richie tilted his head.

“What—more high strung than you, Nance?” She gave him a sharp stare.

“Yes,” she said with raised eyebrows.

Richie took a breath through his teeth, “Jesus, and here I thought you were the only person I knew with permanent stick-in-ass syndrome.” Nancy huffed, rolling her eyes.

“Good to see you again, too Richie.” She folded her arms before turning and walking away.

Richie gave a breathy laugh, watching her leave him. The kitchen’s light flickered as Mike made a loud thump from under his feet. There on the counter was still Karen’s food and glass, still reasonably full and shaking from the motion. Richie’s shoulders stiffened in the silence. The sink was empty, all the towels folded nicely, and the fridge full of little magnets arranged into words like “HELLO” and

“ELEVEN”. In the domestic kitchen Richie felt his fingers twitch and his skin shiver. He pulled out one of the counter chairs, leaving it crooked and different from the others before leaving the room behind, going back up the stairs to his room to remove the Star Wars poster.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Wide Eyed Boy from Freecloud

Richie is picking on Mike, and Mike is making it too easy.

Also I totally head canon Luke as gay and I will fight you if you say otherwise

(also, Richie has no right to call someone a nerd if he can have a casual conversation about Star Wars like that)

12. Chapter Twelve: But nervous all the same

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for waiting everyone. I'm almost done with my BA, so its crunch time right now. I am also looking for a new job cause i am nooooooot a fan of the one I have right now, so its been a little crazy. I made up for the long wait with a longer chapter this time! thank you so much for the patience!

Lucas leaned back on his chair. "Jeez, he sounds annoying, Mike." Mike gave a grumble, resting his chin in his hand. The group of boys sat at the game table, neglecting the monsters and dice. Once Will, Lucas, and Dustin had arrived on their bikes, Mike brought them inside, instantly complaining. They sat down at their normal game table, it full of their game pieces and a few piles of cheese balls. They sat in their usual arrangement, Dustin on Mike's right, Lucas on his left, and Will seated opposite him. With wild hand movement and rushed words, he told of the tall, bruised intruder who stole his room, threatened to rip up his posters, and insisted on calling him cricket.

"I still don't get why he keeps calling me that, but I swear to God, if I hear his stupid face say it once more time, I'm gonna throw something at him," Mike said, rubbing his forehead and pulling at his hair.

"Didn't you throw your pillow at him already?" Dustin asked, looking from Mike to Lucas. Mike waved his off with a flipped wrist and a roll of his eyes.

"He is the most obnoxious person alive. I hope he gets his eyes poked out at the doctor's." Will, silent, scrunched his nose and gave Mike a crooked smile.

"Gross," he mumbled.

Dustin scratched his nose and adjusted the brim of his hat. "He sounds kind of funny, actually."

Mike's face contorted, his eyes squinting and his mouth agape. "Dustin. He's not funny." His voice was stern, his hands planted on the vinyl tabletop.

Dustin shrugged, "He rolled up in a burrito and called your night time talks with El phone sex—I don't know why I didn't think of that sooner—,"

"It's not phone sex!" He yelled, face red and blotchy. He leaned forward and smacked Dustin's hat off his head. The boy let out a snicker before reaching down, picking it up, and making a dramatic motion of dusting off invisible dirt before placing it back on his head. "It's not funny, man. He's an asshole." Mike crossed his arms and leaned back.

Lucas nodded, "He's picking on you the moment you met—he's definitely an asshole." Will gave a stiff nod of agreement.

"I think Mike is just easy to pick on," Dustin said, giving a toothy smile.

Mike grumbled. "No, he's a total jerk. The second he came down here, he threatened to rip up my New Hope poster, called Luke Skywalker gay, and accused me of making out with my sister." The boys simultaneously grimaced. Lucas shook his head, his lips pursed.

"Ugh—that is so gross," he said, waving his hands around. "I do not *ever* want to think about you and Nancy making out." He shuddered. Will joined him, pretend gagging. Mike nodded.

"He's disgusting," Mike responded, leaning back and rubbing his nose. Dustin patted the table on his right.

"Wait, wait, wait, back up—Luke Skywalker is not gay." Dustin sat, wide eyed, his eyes darting between the boys. "There is no concrete evidence that supports that theory."

Lucas raised an eyebrow, "You've heard of that theory?" Dustin ignored him, continuing.

"He liked it when Leia kissed him, right?" He pointed at the table, poking it with emphasis. "Nothing about the way he acted said he

didn't like it when Leia kissed him."

Lucas squinted, "Leia is Luke's sister, though."

"That's not the point!" Dustin grabbed the corner of the table. "The point is that there is nothing substantial that suggests that Luke is gay—why is that even a question?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "I think Richie was just being an asshole."

Lucas nodded. "Yeah—no one would actually think that. That would, like, mess up Luke's character." Dustin pursed his lips and gave a quick jerk of his head in agreement. Shifting in his seat, Will picked at the tips of his fingers, shoulders hunched, giving a slight nod. Above them, a door swung, and the familiar fall of feet banged on the floor. Little flecks of dust floated from the ceiling as the boys simultaneously looked up, hearing muffled voices and childish shrieks. Mike gave a long, drawn out groan.

"He's home," he said as the door to the basement opened. Loud stomps paraded down the steps, accompanied by squealing giggles. Riche ducked his head to see the seated boys, Holly dangling upside down from his right arm. Richie paused once to shift her higher, making a dramatic grunt that tailed off into a wince. Holly screamed with a big, toothy smile.

"Hey, Mikey-my-boy, Auntie Karen wants to know if your friends are staying for dinner," Richie said, squinting at the kids. He adjusted Holly and she let out another giggle.

"You still can't see? You guys didn't get glasses from the doctor?" Mike asked, leaning on his hand and side eyeing Richie.

Richie rubbed his nose. "It'll take, like, two fucking weeks for my new specs to get here." He swung Holly over his shoulder, carrying her like a fireman. Richie gave a small huff of pain before asking, "And who are these nerds?"

Lucas and Mike share a look as Dustin chimed, "I'm Dustin," with a wave of his hand. Richie gave him a peace sign. "That's Will", Dustin

continued, pointing to the boy. Will stared, wide eyed. He looked quickly between Mike and Richie before turning his gaze at his hands. Pink touched his cheeks. "And that is Lucas," Dustin said, as Lucas rested his chin on his palm and gave a quick head jerk of acknowledgment.

Adjusting the girl on his shoulder, Richie nodded, "Cool—don't expect me to remember that." Dustin gave an uncomfortable laugh and mumbled something about how name memory is harder to retain than facial memory. Richie interrupted him, "So, are you guys staying and playing your nerd game? 'Cause Auntie Karen needs to know how much meatloaf to make." Richie smiled. "Personally, I don't think meat is ever supposed to be in loaf form—it's just unnatural." He turned to leave, Holly bouncing on his shoulders. With pounding steps, he trotted upstairs, stopping once to pretend to drop the girl, which resulted in another piercing scream. Karen called from the kitchen to lower the volume, and Richie called back, "Excuse me, Auntie Karen, but that is the scream of someone having a grand ol' time. I know it might sound unfamiliar." He kicked the door closed with a slam.

The boys listened to the murmurs above before Lucas broke the silence. "Did we even answer the question?" Mike hit his head on the table as both Will and Dustin shook their heads no.

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Richie threw Holly onto the couch with a grunt. The girl bounced once before relaxing on the cushions, loud laughs quickly falling from her smile. Richie slumped next to her, a sigh escaping his lips.

Sitting up, Holly pushed his arm. "One more time?"

Richie shook his head. "Holly, kiddo, my body still hates me." She pouted, falling back. "You think you could ask your mom for an icepack?" Holly scotched forward with a puffed out bottom lip and sagging shoulders.

"Please?"

Raising an eyebrow, Richie saw the girl look up at him, eyes glossy.

He snickered, “Jesus, kid—keep that up and you’ll have everyone doing what you want.” He sunk into the couch. “Get me some ice, and once I’m done I’ll give you another piggy back ride, okay?” Holly’s pout morphed into an excited smile, and she jumped off the couch and ran on tiptoes to the kitchen. Richie shouted after her, “You will go far in this world, my child.” He shook his head and gave a breathy laugh. A lull of silence sat in the room, and Richie turned his eyes to the only source of sound at that moment. A small wall clock hung on the wood paneled wall, ticking rhythmically opposite him. It was around 4:11. *Stan is getting ready for Shabbat dinner right now.* He rubbed the back of his neck, stretching out the stiffness. *Eds should be home now, though.* Rolling his shoulders, Richie watched as Holly ran back into the room holding an icepack in her hands. Karen followed behind her, a tired smile on her face.

“Feeling sore?” she asked, twisting the dishtowel in her hands.

“Oh it’s not that bad,” Richie said. “Ribs aren’t really that essential, anyway.” Karen eyed him, shifting from foot to foot. Richie grabbed the icepack from Holly’s hands, the girl holding it out to him like a sacred object. He gently placed it on his right side, doing his best not to let the ache show on his face. The ice settled into his side, and he gave Holly a little wink and a thank you.

“Hey Auntie, could I use the phone?” Karen brought the towel up closer to her chest.

“Who would you like to call?”

Richie shrugged. “Two of my friends—Eddie and Beverly.” Karen’s lips curled at the edges, and her fiddling fingers soothed.

“I’ll give you until dinner,” she said, giving him a hidden smile and a side glance as she walked out of the room. Holly followed after her, asking what was for supper. With a grunt, Richie stood from the couch, making his way over to the reading nook where the phone sat, locked into the wall with a long bending cord. It looked like someone had undone a few of the curls, the normally uniform coils bending out and twisting in misuse. Richie plopped down on the chair and sat back for a moment before picking up the phone. The number he dialed was from muscle memory.

Richie crossed his fingers as the line rang. It chimed twice before a familiar voice sounded on the other line. "Hello, this is Eddie Kaspbrak." Richie relaxed his spin with a sigh.

"Hey Eds."

Eddie gasped. "Oh my god—Richie. You made it." Richie gave a light laugh.

"Yup, I'm at my aunt's place. It's just as stuffy as I imagined." Eddie audibly sniffed on the other line.

"Have you been icing your ribs? And how are your stitches? You haven't been picking them, right?"

Richie shook his head, "Icing them as we speak, Spaghetti. And the stitches are as beautiful as when you fixed them up for me."

Eddie breathed into the phone. "You should have changed the bandage by now. You better do that."

"Righto, there, my love." Eddie gave a laughing sigh and mumbled "Shut up."

"So Spaghetti, how is everyone missing me?" Richie leaned his chest on the counter, letting his head rest in his elbow.

Eddie responded, "Well, Ben didn't stop crying until after we got back to Bill's house. And Stan was more silent than usual on the drive back."

Richie buried his face in the crook of his elbow for a moment before pasting a grin on his face. "Aw, shucks. It sounds like you losers really miss little ole me."

"Of course we miss you," Eddie paused, "We love you." Another pause. "I love you."

Richie gave a light smile. "I love you too, Spaghetti face."

Eddie groaned. "Will you ever stop with that?"

“Not until you stop being adorable.”

“If that’s the case, then you should never have started calling me that.”

Richie pursed his lips. “Hey—you’re fucking adorable.”

“Nope.”

“Um, yes.”

“I disagree.”

“Too bad—not up for debate, my adorable Spaghetti man with his cute little noodle face and soft rigatoni butt”

Eddie gave a muffled laugh into his receiver. Richie grinned. “What? What does that even mean, you fucking Trashmouth.”

“Oh, you know exactly what it means,” Richie said. Eddie sighed before letting out a small gasp. Richie’s smile faded.

“Shit, Mom just got back.” Eddie hesitated, his voice low. “Call sometime next week after school. She has her book club—,”

“On Wednesday at 4, I know Eds.” Richie gave a small sigh. “I love you.” Mrs. Kaspbrak called in the background, reaching the receiver and Richie’s ear. “Not as much as I love Mrs. Kasprak, though. Send my favorite ride all my love.”

Eddie groaned, “Shut the fuck up, Richie.” He called back to his mother before saying, “I love you, too. Call me on Wednesday.”

“Will do, kiddo,” Richie answered, and Eddie gave one more whispered goodbye before hanging up the phone, leaving Richie with the dead tone of an ended call. Resting his head on the counter, he shifted the icepack higher on his rib. The phone still rang in his ear as he scrunched his face, feeling the tug on his stitches and the sting on his bruised eye. He shook his head before placing the phone on the receiver before picking it back up and punching in another number. It dialed for a minute before a loud voice answered.

“—and remember to put dish soap in this time, please,” the voice yelled before it quieted to a professional tone. “Marsh residence, this is Pamela.”

“Hey Ms. Marsh its Bev’s friend Richie. Could I talk to her for a sec?”

“I’m sorry but she’s doing the dishes right now—could you call back in a little bit?”

Richie rolled his fingers on the desk. “I promised I’d just tell her I’m all safe and sound.” There was a small gasp of realization.

“Oh—you’re the friend who just moved, correct?”

Richie pursed his lips, “It was more a mandatory uprooting, but moving is a nicer way to put it.” There was a beat of silence before Pamela relented.

“It can only be for a minute—she didn’t do any of her chores all week,” she said with a sigh and an obvious head shake. She called Bev over, “Bevy, your friend is on the line.” A crash was heard as Bev rushed to the phone and snatched the phone out of her aunt’s hands.

“Richie you bastard what took you so long?”

Richie let out a loud laugh. “Girl, I got other stuff going on—I had to unpack my two whole bags of dirty clothes today. What— did you think you were my priority?” he teased.

“I am everybody’s priority,” she said without missing a beat. Richie grinned.

“Right, just like chores are your top priority. How the fuck do you forget dish soap?”

Bev scoffed, “Dukes of Hazzard was on—you think I was going to miss that?”

“Well that John Schneider is pretty gorgeous.”

“I mean, the most handsome man after my boy Ben.”

“Of course—if Eds hadn’t already turned me, I’m sure Schneider’s ten gallon hat would have done it for me.”

“He does it for all of us.” Richie nodded in agreement. Beverly continued, “So how was that bus ride?”

Richie shrugged his shoulders even if she couldn’t see. “As fantastic as you would expect a 10 hour long bus ride to be.” In the corner of his eye Richie spotted Karen leaning on the door frame, watching him. She pointed to his icepack with eyebrows raised. He saw it slipped from its spot, and Richie adjusted it.

Beverly said, “Did you reign in the trashmouth of did everyone on the bus get to hear your characters?” He heard the smile in her voice. Richie jeered.

“I’ll have you know I was entirely respectable—I only made three children cry as opposed to my usual fourteen.” Karen raised an eyebrow at him, but Richie just smiled at her. Holly tugged at her mother’s pants, waiting for Richie to finish.

“Well it sounds like you are shaping up to be a fine young gentleman,” she answered.

“But of course,” he said with a British accent. Beverly gave a small laugh.

“Aunt Pam is giving me the ‘shut up and do your chores’ signal—I got to go.” Richie’s shoulder slumped slightly.

“Well, Ms. Marsh’s word is law.” He leaned back on the chair. “Give her a high five for me, alright?”

“Will do, Rich.”

“Talk to you soon, Bevy.”

“Love you.”

Riche smiled. “Love you, too.” He placed the phone back on the receiver. Karen leaned on the wall, her face trying and failing to suppress a grin. Holly let go of her mother’s pant leg, inching to

Richie's side. Richie gave Karen a slightly confused smile, it curling at the edges of his lips.

"Beverly seems nice," she said, tilting her head to the side.

Richie nodded his head, "Yeah, she's pretty fantastic." He raised an eyebrow at her when Karen gave him a strange, thoughtful smile before turning back toward the kitchen. Holly poked Richie's knee.

"Are you all done?" she asked, sucking on a lock of blonde hair.

Richie grinned, placed the icepack on the counter, and scooped her up in his arms.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Absolute Beginners

Richie is too gay to function. Did you like the little conversations? I liked writing Bev and Richie's back and forth dialog a lot, but I'm still not sure how i feel about this chapter.

Also I had no idea what Bev's aunt's name is, so I just went with Pam since I watched The Office earlier today :)

13. Chapter Thirteen: Are you ready for a brand new beat?

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone! Its been a while, i know. But I have news!

I finished my degree with a 4.0! Summa cum laude bitches!!!

It's so weird to say i'm proud of myself, but I really am. It's been four years of ridiculous work but i made it and I made it with the unhealthy perfectionism that I put my self worth in. And now on to the masters, since I seem to be a perpetual student.

But anyway, if anyone is still reading this story, thank you so much for the patience!

Richie made a face at Mike when he looked at the meatloaf on his plate. He gave a dramatic grimace as he took a bite, pretend gagging before swallowing it and giggling to himself. Tapping his fork on his plate, Mike rolled his eyes. The group sat around the table, a few folded chairs shoved in between the oak dining chairs for the guests to sit on. Mike shifted on the uncomfortable metal, side eyeing Richie as his cousin leaned over to take a spoonful of rice before sitting back on the cushioned chair seated next to Nancy.

“So how has school been, boys? Dustin, you were working on a project for Mr. Clarke, right?” Karen asked, taking a small bite of a woody asparagus. She smiled at the boys before nodding to Nancy to pass the salt and pepper. Dustin stopped shoveling rice into his mouth, wiping his face with the back of his hand, and went into a hurried explanation of his project about electrophysiology. He waved his arms around, accidentally flinging rice onto Will, who jumped in surprise before giving a small laugh and brushing the rice off the table onto the floor. Richie noticed and snickered. Lucas, who was in between Will and Ted, totally ignored Dustin’s speech, having heard it multiple times. He quietly ate his meatloaf, his chin resting in his hand.

“It’s going to be amazing—the human nervous system is so intricate. I’m going to demonstrate it in class with a frog.” Dustin gave a smile with his new adult teeth, a few stray asparagus strings stuck in between them.

Richie, mouthful of rice, said, “That’s some Frankenstein shit, man.” Nancy raised an eyebrow at him.

Ted, looking up over the edge of the Hawkins Post, firmly responded, “Language.”

Richie stopped a moment, eyes darting from Karen’s disapproving side eye as she helped Holly with her meatloaf. Leaning forward on his elbows, he swallowed his food and followed with, “Excuse me, Uncle Ted.” He paused, turning to Dustin. “That’s some mother fucking Frankenstein shit, man.” Lucas choked on his meatloaf as Karen whipped her head back to Richie.

Ted folded down the paper. “Language!” Richie pursed his lips to hide a growing smile. Nancy and Mike’s eyes connected before they both looked toward their father. He had the determined look that used to work on them when they were children, chest puffed and eyes squinting. “That’s enough of that—I don’t want to hear foul language like that.”

Richie leaned toward Nancy and mumbled to her, “Jesus, what does your dad have against birds?” He smirked when she shook her head at him, a groan falling from her lips. Ted gave him a weak look before folding his paper back up and returning to the daily news.

Karen, attempting to break the awkward tension, said, “I bet the kids in the class will enjoy that a lot.” Dustin shrugged and smiled. “And are you boys all getting ready for graduation?” They all nodded, Mike and Lucas looking uninvolved while Will and Dustin looked up from their food. Dustin nodded enthusiastically while Will picked at his fingers, eyeing his meatloaf and rice. Karen tilted her head at Will. “Are you nervous about it, Will?” He shrugged.

“I just don’t like the idea of being on stage,” he mumbled, his fork pushing a piece of asparagus back and forth.

Nancy said, "It's not that bad, Will. You just walk across the stage. No one really cares that much." She gave him a small smile, and the corners of Will's mouth twitched up for a second. Richie saw the nervous twitch of Will's fingers as his fork stabbed into the asparagus, bringing it up to his mouth and scrunching his nose a little at the bitter flavor.

"You know I did a speech at my middle school graduation," Richie said, leaning forward. Karen's eyebrows raised. Mike snorted.

"What, did you grab the mic and streak across the stage?" He stared at Richie, raising his head in a challenging glare. Richie just smiled.

"Nah, I was valedictorian."

The table was silent, all heads raised and staring. Richie looked around the table. "Christ, you all think really low of me," he laughed.

Mike squinted his eyes. "You're lying." Richie shrugged and shook his head.

"Nope, they actually let this idiot on stage to give a speech. You don't know how pissed my friend Ben was—he was .3% behind me."

Karen clasped her hands. "That's fantastic, Richie. What did you speak about?"

Richie smirked, "How unsupportive and terrible all the teachers were."

Nancy sighed, "Of course you did." She angrily picked at her food. Mike recalled her fussing over her middle school graduation and competing for valedictorian with another girl whose name he couldn't remember. Nancy brushed her nose with a finger, her face pinched.

Leaning to look at Will, Richie said, "How about this—at your graduation, I'll make sure to do something stupid and loud when you go on stage. That way everyone will be looking at me, instead." Mike watched as pink tinted Will's cheeks. He gave Richie a little curved smile and Mike saw Richie wink at him before going back to his meatloaf, obviously holding his nose while taking a bite. Mike sniffed

and shoved rice in his mouth.

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“Delicious, Auntie,” Richie said, leaning back on his seat, stretching his hands above his head. Dustin and Lucas took the plates from the table as Ted retreated to the television. Karen sighed when she saw him plop down on his La-Z-Boy and immediately lean back, shutting his eyes with his hands placed on his stomach. Mike followed Lucas into the kitchen, murmuring something Richie couldn’t hear under his breath.

“Thank you Richie. Have you gotten over your fear of meatloaf?”

Richie shrugged. “It’s not the worst thing I’ve eaten.”

Karen shook her head. “High praise.” Richie cackled as she walked away, a sighing laugh escaping her mouth. Nancy picked Holly up out of her chair and Richie waved at her from over Nancy’s shoulder. The girl hid, peaking out behind Nancy’s hair with a silly face. Richie gave a surprised face, and the girl smothered her giggle into Nancy’s neck. Rolling his shoulders, Richie placed a hand gently on his side, feeling the slight ache. He sniffed in the silence, pressing against his side.

“Do you need ice?” asked Will. Richie whipped his head to the boy, him still seated in his fold-up chair. Will’s eyes darted from Richie to the table, then to the side. His shoulders were hunched, his back a curved question mark. He looked like he was doing his best to disappear, curling up into nothing.

“Yeah, that sounds great.” Will nodded stiffly before raising from the chair, pushing it in, and walking around in the direction of the kitchen. Stalling by the doorframe, he shook his head, his pin straight hair tossing lightly, and swiveled back to look at Richie.

“I just,” he paused. Taking a breath, he said, “I just wanted to let you know that I agree with you.” He stared at Richie, and Richie raised an eyebrow.

“Agree about what?”

“About Luke Skywalker.” Will hesitated but continued, “About him being gay.” His sentence quieted toward the end, like he was afraid someone in the other room would hurt him for saying the word. Richie straightened his back, staring at the boy who stood stiffly in front of him.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Richie said, “I mean—it’s pretty fucking obvious.”

Will let out a gasping laugh, “Totally.” He raised his head, giving Richie a small, quivering smile. Richie returned it with a grin.

“I’ve got you, kiddo.” Will nodded quickly before turning out of the room to get ice. Richie slumped back in his chair, eyes wide and body stiff. His head lulled back and a long sigh escaped his lips. “Poor kid,” he mumbled. A call from the kitchen broke his silence, and Richie stood, placing both hands on the table to steady himself. “What is it?” he called back.

Karen poked her head out from the hall, a dish towel in her hands. “I was wondering if you have a nice shirt to wear to church tomorrow.”

Richie stiffened. “What?”

Karen responded, going back to her dishes, out of his view. “We have church at 9 tomorrow morning. Do you have anything nice you could wear?”

Richie scrunched his eyes. “Um, could I do literally anything else tomorrow? Like stay home and clean? Or get arrested?”

Karen responded with a firm, “No, you’re coming.” She walked back into the dining room, drying a glass in her hands. “We go every Sunday as a family.” Richie stared at her, his eyes pleading. She raised an eyebrow, her lips pursed. “I’m not bending on this.” Turning on her heel, she strolled out, calling back, “You can borrow one of your uncle’s old shirts. Make sure to wear jeans without any holes.”

Richie plopped back onto his chair, resting his head on the oak table.

“Jesus Christ,” he mumbled.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter song title—Dancing in the street

I know not much really happened in this chapter, so for people waiting for updates, its probably pretty disappointing. I'm slowly getting somewhere with this, but I wanted to build on the characters as much as I can. I still haven't really figured out what I'm going to do with Nancy, but I know what I'm doing with Will. He is a smol child and Richie wants to protect him.

14. Chapter Fourteen: I've never done good things

Notes for the Chapter:

welcome back. I have no excuse for not updating like the day after I posted the last chapter. I was already close to finished with this chapter when I posted chapter thirteen, but I have been enjoying my time away from school, and have thus been leaving my laptop off. Today I got antsy, since I hadn't written in a while, so I sat down and finished this chapter (and am debating starting another, totally unrelated fanfic)

thank you everyone for sticking with me!

also this chapter is kind of short sry

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all,” the priest said, his arms outreaching to the congregation. His voice was a low drawl that carried over the room, creating quiet among the crowd. Richie sat silent as everyone responded “And with you in spirit” simultaneously. He tugged at the loose collar of his dress shirt. It was pinstriped, obviously over 10 years old judging by the 70s print donning the fabric. Richie pulled the short sleeves down, doing his best to cover his wrists with the cheap material. He slouched in the pew, peering over to see Karen with Holly on her lap, the girl awkwardly shifting on her mother’s legs. Her hair was pinned back in intricate purple bows that she tugged at. Karen pulled her hands away from her hair, pressing her blonde locks back into place. Beside her sat Mike, his dress suit stiff and pressed, his bow tie placed just right. Ted was on Mike’s left, his head already lolling back in his attempt to stay awake. *How he could fall asleep in seats specifically designed to be uncomfortable enough to keep you awake is beyond me*, Richie thought, leaning his arms on the pew in front of him, resting his head on his hands. Karen tapped his shoulder, and he saw her give him a firm stare, her eyebrows raised and her lips a thin line. Richie sighed and sat back on the seat, watching the fat priest speak briefly about the sermon before turning around and chanting something in a loud single note. Richie scratched his nose, shifting and wincing as his bruised side

aches from them uncomfortable pews. Stretching his neck, he looked across the room to see Nancy seated with some older boy who was wearing a loose tie. He sat between Nancy and Will, leaning down to whisper something to the boy. Will responded with a small smile and said something back, making the other boy give a crooked grin.

Suddenly, everyone stood and began reciting something at the same time. Richie shot up off his seat, looking for what they were reading, but saw that they were all staring straight ahead, speaking from memory. Even Holly was murmuring certain words, her hand clasped securely in her mother's. Richie, with raised shoulders and fingers fiddling with his shirt sleeves, scanned the church, watching the jaws of the people synchronize, falling and rising as each word passed their lips. He felt familiar stares as he noticed a group of older women, mouths still moving, eyeing him suspiciously. He held his jaw tight, squinting to make their faces clearer, but only found fuzzy scowls. Picking at the seams of his jeans, Richie shifted in his stance, his eyes returning to find their disapproving looks. Biting the inside of his mouth, Richie rolled back his shoulders and gave the women a wide smile, winking. They gave short gasps in between their memorized phrases, and Richie chuckled under his breath, placing his hands in his pockets and leaning back and forth on his heels.

Then, the congregation stopped all at once, letting the priest speak before periodically saying, "Lord, have mercy." Richie followed along until the organ behind him started playing. He flinched at the sudden sound and watched as once again the room became synchronized, a hymn that was not popular enough for him to recognize filling the space. And suddenly it was too loud, too much, and Richie leaned down to Karen's ear.

"Auntie Karen, where is the bathroom?" She turned up to him, and he offered his ear.

"Right down the main hall to the left. Should be a little sign on the door." Richie nodded and patted her shoulder in thanks, and made his way passed the disapproving eyes of the older women straight to the exit.

Richie took a slow intake of breath as the church doors closed behind him. The organs were muffled by the wooden doors, and Richie

scanned the sidewalk, seeing the church sign describing the morning sermon. A few of the ushers were standing around the sign, having checked off their spiritual box for the week. Cigarettes hanging from their mouths, they joked loudly, their large stomachs jostling with the movement. Flexing his fingers, Richie itched, his lungs remembering the taste of lingering smoke and tar. Searching as well as he could, Richie spied what appeared to be general store a block down the road. Hands in his pockets, he trotted down the church steps and crossed the road.

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When the familiar bell chimed from above the door, Joyce raised her head, pausing in her conversation with a regular customer. A tall, bruised boy walked in, fussing quietly with his ill-fitting shirt. Joyce gave him a smile that the boy stiffly returned, and she went back to discussing the weather and what her children were up to. Another chime rang in the room, and Joyce brushed a dark hair behind her ear, looking back to the door.

“Jean, where have you been,” asked the low, familiar drawl of Chief Hopper. He was suited in his uniform, his beard still unkempt and his buttons still stretching from one too many beers.

“Isn’t it obvious, I’m avoiding you,” joked the customer, Hopper clapping his shoulder with his hand. Joyce gave a small chuckle as the men continued their banter. Over their shoulders she saw the tall boy looking from Hopper to something behind her for a moment before busying himself with the key chain stand.

Hopper turned to Joyce, raising an eyebrow. “Since when do you work Sundays?”

Joyce shrugged her shoulders, “Since Donald got sick last night and begged me to come and help.” Hopper shook his head.

“That man works you too much, kiddo.”

Joyce made a face. “Please, I can handle the shop anytime, Hop.”

Hopper and Jean nodded in agreement. “We know you can handle

anything, Joyce,” Jean said. “Oh, did you grab the Camels for me?”

Joyce raised her hands in a rush of movement. “Oh, damn it—look at me.” She turned behind her to grab a pack, looking back to ask, “one or two,” and when she got a confirmation took two packs from the shelf. Before turning back she grabbed Hopper’s usual Marlboros and placed her handful of cigarettes onto the counter. Joyce gave a sigh and leaned towards the men. “So have you been cutting back like you said you would, Hop?”

Hopper rubbed the back of his neck guiltily, and Joyce shook her head, a smile reaching her lips. Jean gave a laugh before smacking the chief’s back. “Right there with you, Jim. The wife’s been making me sit out on the porch, now.” He raising his shoulders. “She can’t stand the smell anymore.”

Hopper gave a laugh, moving to speak when a crash startled them, and they whipped their head at the boy. He stood, eyes wide, as the keychain stand fallen onto the ground.

“Shit—shit I’m sorry—I was trying to spin it and it just fucking collapsed,” he said, moving his hair out of his face to reveal a stitched cheek and spotty bruising. Joyce rushed, moving from behind the counter to his side.

“It’s alright—this old thing was already falling apart,” she said, picking up some of the key chains off the floor. For a moment, she tried to lift the metal stand, but found it too heavy. “Hop, could you help me with this?” Hopper and Jean instantly crouched down, ignoring the fidgeting boy as he stepped aside toward the checkout counter, out of the way. Hopper, with a final push, got the stand upright, and Joyce and Jean gathered all the fallen key chains, hanging them back onto the small pegs while Hop secured the stand back in place. Joyce barely registered the twinkle of the door’s bell as she did her best to place named key chains together, eventually shaking her head and just shoving any key chain anywhere, vowing to sort it when the store got slow.

“Jesus, kid be more careful,” Hopper said, turning around to find them alone in the store. Joyce stretched her neck looking down aisles and corners, the boy nowhere to be seen. “And he’s gone,” Hopper

shook his head, scratching the back of his neck with his hat.

“You see the bruises on his face?” Joyce asked, gesturing to her own cheek with a quick motion. Hopper rubbed his eye for a second, nodding.

“You ever seen him before? At Jonathan’s school?” Joyce shrugged her shoulders, crossing her arms. With her eyebrows furrowed in worry, she shook her head, “Let me ring you guys up.” She walked back to the counter, reaching to grab Jean’s basket when the man gave a scrunched face.

“Um, where are the cigarettes?” Jean asked, pointing at the counter. Joyce and Hopper followed his finger to the now empty counter top, the three packs of cigarettes missing. Joyce raised a brow before turning back to Hopper, who gave a loud sigh and a mumbled curse.

“—fucking teenagers,” Hopper said, putting his hat back on. “Christ, the fucking kid lifted them.” With quick steps, he swung open the door and rushed outside.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter song title—Ashes to Ashes

I made up the character Jean entirely, he is no where in the Stranger Things world. I needed some random character to throw into this scene. Actually, he is loosely based off of one of my favorite customers that comes into the bank every day. Hop is on the case, Richie is a little criminal, fake-scared boi and Joyce is tired. I have o idea how to write Hopper's dialog-- I gotta work on that for the next chapter.

Richie did say he'd rather be arrested than go to church :D

15. Chapter Fifteen: They say your life is going very well

Notes for the Chapter:

I live

again, sorry for the lack of updates. I feel like you are all used to this by now so I might stop apologizing every update

But life has been crazy. Right now at work I am a part time employee who works overtime. One coworker sick, another a total jerk and quitting, so now we're wicked understaffed. I'm doing my best to help everyone, but now my life has taken a backseat until we get some new people. I'm not gonna leave them while they're already understaffed, but I need to get a new gig.

anyway, thats my life update and excuse for not updating.

Also this chapter gave me wicked writers block.

Karen shifted in her seat, rolling her shoulders against the hard wood of the pew. Holly's head was draped in her lap, the girl doing her best to remain silent during the priest's sermon. Hands in front of her face, she closed and opened her fingers and thumbs, her hands matching the low drawl coming from the pulpit. The girl's legs were laying up on the pew, crossed on the ankles, taking up the space where Richie was previously sitting. Patting Holly's head, Karen craned her neck, leaning back to look at the exit. It had been nearly 20 minutes and Richie had yet to return from his trip to the bathroom. Furrowing her brows and darting her eyes, Karen slid slightly closer Mike on her left. He sat still with slouched shoulders and glazed eyes.

"Mike, go check on Richie in the restroom," she whispered.

Mike raised an eyebrow. "What—did he get lost?" He sniffed and looked straight ahead. "He can find his way back." Karen reached to his leg and grabbed his leg, shaking it.

"Now," Karen said, giving his leg one firm grip before releasing it. With a roll of his eyes, Mike rose from his seat and shuffled passed Karen and Holly to the bathroom. Karen watched as he disappeared down the hall, her hands now playing with Holly's hair. She ruffled her bangs before smoothing the blonde locks back into place, only to ruffle them again. With pinched lips she forced her eyes back on the priest, his words drifting through her ears but not quite reaching her. When Holly started brushing Karen's fingers away, Mike returned, poking his mother's shoulder with a finger.

"The bathroom is out of order," he whispered. "I asked one of the ushers, and he said it's been broken since yesterday." Mike moved Holly's legs off the chair with a quick shove, and her feet hit the ground with a smack. She pouted, shoving his shin with her foot.

"Since yesterday?" Karen asked, ignoring her daughter's misbehavior. Mike shrugged, pursing his lips. Karen straightened her back, furrowing her eyebrows. With eyes closed and a long sigh escaping her mouth, Karen rose from her seat and said a quiet, mumbled "Shit."

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"Shit," Hopper said as he rushed out the doors. They chimed closed behind him as he scanned the streets, his hat shading his eyes. "Shit shit shit," he whispered, searching the surrounding area, eyes catching on any passing person. Few resembled the bruised boy who just exited the store and Hopper circled around, searching down the streets. In the distance, he caught sight of a tall thin figure jogging toward the church. With a grunt, he took off in pursuit.

Hopper ran toward the boy, one hand on his hat as it threatened to fall off his head. The kid continued his casual jogging, and Hopper caught up to his eased movements quickly. "Hey—stop," he called, and the boy responded with a quick turn of his head, and then proceeded to turn his jog into a sprint. "Jesus Christ," Hopper murmured before speeding up, reaching the boy and snatching his arm. The boy struggled for a moment before facing the chief, eyes darting around. Hopper tightened his grip as the boy gave one stiff sniff before straightening his back and taking a breath.

“What seems to be the problem, Officer,” he asked, putting on a relaxed smile and raising both of his hands up in a surrender. Hopper’s bushy eyebrows furrowed.

“Hand them over, kid,” he said. The boy again looked around, this time in confusion. With a small smirk, the boy shrugged his shoulders.

“Sir, I think you’re mistaking me for someone,” the boy shrugged again. “I’m just a simple sinner on my way to church.” He pointed with his thumb at the old Catholic church that was finishing the organ music for the end of communion. Hopper tightened his grip.

“Cut the shit and hand them over,” he threatened, his skin pricking in annoyance. Hopper gave his arm a quick yank, and the boy responded with his own.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” the boy said, giving another yank of his arm, and Hopper reacted with swift precision. He twisted the boy’s arm behind the kid’s back, him protesting loudly. The chief grabbed his other arm and with a forceful shove pushed the boy into a nearby car. Hopper bent him so his face was kissing the hood of the car, one hand now pressing the kid’s head down while the other clasped both of his thin wrists together.

The boy attempted to twist his arms away, but Hopper tightened his grip. “ey, Ponch, this is all lovely and kinky, but I got to tell you that —.”

“Shut up,” he said with force. The kid tried to twist again, and Hopper pushed his head down. The boy let out a small yelp as Hopper pushed his stomach against the car, the kid’s face turning from a snarky smile into a grimace. Hopper leaned to the kid’s ear and began to speak in a steady, powerful voice. “Where are—.”

“JAMES HOPPER,” interrupted a loud call, and Hopper raised his head to see Karen Wheeler running toward them, the doors of the church opened with people flooding out of the service. Head down and hands clenched, she rushed to them, only stopping a small distance from Hopper and the boy. “What the hell do you think

you're doing?"

Hopper, eyebrows lined in confusion, looked behind Karen at the small crowd forming in the distance. "Police work," he responded easily. Like it was obvious.

Karen crossed her arms, fingernails digging into her arms. "And what has my nephew done?" Hopper raised an eyebrow.

"Auntie, it's alright, I got this handled," the boy said, his voice light despite the look of pain on his face.

"Richie, the adults are talking," Karen responded. The kid, Richie, shrugged as well as he could while being pinned down, and shut up for the moment. With her foot tapping rapidly, Karen asked, "What's he suspected of doing?"

"Shoplifting—I witnessed him stealing cigarettes from Melvald's," Hopper said.

Karen's eyebrows raised. "You saw him take them?"

Hopper's eyes narrowed slightly. "Karen—he was there, caused a distraction, and then the cigarettes were gone." A small crowd of churchgoers watched as Karen raised her head, eyeing Hopper down her nose.

"So have you searched him and found anything? 'Cause everything you've just told me is nothing but circumstantial evidence." Hopper tightened his grip and set his jaw. From under him he heard Richie start to laugh.

"Holy shit, Auntie—do you watch CHiPs too? That was some police shit right there—."

Both Hopper and Karen shouted at the boy, Karen with a firm, "Richie please, we're having a discussion," and Hopper with a loud, "Shut up." The boy continued to giggle under his breath, letting out a quite wince in between breaths.

Karen shook her head and spoke, "Pat him down, Chief." She waved one hand at Richie, "See if you find the cigarettes." Behind her, the

other Wheelers stood together, arms crossed and looking anywhere but the eyes of the lingering congregation. Nancy stood as close to Jonathan as possible, attempting to blend into the crowd and not into her family. Mike was keeping Holly from running up to Richie, the girl's lip quivering, big and puffed. Closest to Karen stood Ted, his hands placed in his pockets, his stance relaxed and confident. Hopper stared Karen in the eye for one slow second before raising Richie to his full height. He released his wrists, but forced him to lean with both hands flat against the hood of the car. Firm hands traced down Richie's legs and arms, in between his legs, which resulted in a high pitched sound from the boy. Hopper ignored him, his eyebrows pinched and his jaw clenched.

Nothing. There were no cigarettes on the kid.

Standing, Hopper looked over the kid's shoulder at Karen, who stood in the same position—arms crossed and foot tapping. She shifted her weight to her right foot, drumming her fingers against her upper arm once before saying a loud, “Well?”

Hopper stood slight before giving a huff and shoving Richie toward his aunt with a grunt. “Don't make me do this again, kid,” he said, glaring at Richie as the boy gave the cop a nod and two thumbs up. Karen grabbed Richie's shoulder, and practically dragged him away, giving one loud quip to the audience before collecting the rest of her children and pushing them all toward their vehicle. While Hopper watched the small crowd begin to disperse, he adjusted his hat, staring at the back of the tall, bruise kid. The boy looked back once, gave Hopper a large, toothy grin, and jogged behind his rushing aunt. Hopper shook his head, clenching his jaw, and headed back to Melvald's.

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The drive back to the house was relatively silent, save for Holly's quite singing in the back seat. Nancy had gone back to the Byer's house to help Jonathan make dinner for his mother, so car was full of the remaining Wheelers with Richie seated in the back on the driver's side. Richie's eyes occasionally connected with Karen's in the rearview mirror, her eyes focused and intense. He quickly turned to stare out the window.

Once they arrived at the house, Karen silently left the car, taking Holly out of her booster seat. Mike retreated to the basement, taking off his bow tie as he went. Ted followed behind the family, immediately heading to the living room and sitting down in his La-Z-Boy with an elongated grunt. As Holly toed off her shoes and ran to her doll house, Richie watched Karen remove her purse and place it on the reading nook before continuing forward into the kitchen. Richie stood in hall for a moment, his fingers twitching in the silence before he followed Karen. In the kitchen, she was leaning into the fridge, looking intently at its contents. Richie leaned on the counter, shifting his weight back and forth, before breaking the silence. "Do we have any mac and cheese?"

"Did you steal the cigarettes," Karen said, whipping her body to stand full and fierce. Her arms were stiff at her side, hands clenched into tight fists that shook. Richie eyed them for a moment, a chill running down his back.

"You saw him give me the ol' pat down, Auntie," Richie said. Gesturing a patting motion, he continued, "He was very thorough, believe me—."

"Richard Tozier." Karen took a step forward, her voice unwavering. "Look me in the eye." With a stead glare, she studied his face, reading any flinching expression on his face. He stood steely. "Did you steal the cigarettes?"

A moment's pause passed as Richie kept his gaze on her face. Then, he said a firm, "No."

Switching her gaze rapidly between both of his eyes, Karen searched for an inkling. A sign. A fleeting moment of low confidence. After giving him one more look, she turned back into the fridge. "I'll make some mac and cheese for everyone for lunch. Let Mike know, please." Richie nodded, tapped the counter in a quick rhythm, and opened the basement door to give Mike a quick call. He didn't wait for a response before shutting the door and heading up to his bedroom, rushing up the steps. With his back pressed firmly against his door, Richie let himself take a loud breath and a shuddering exhale. Shaking his head, he took off his ill-fitting shirt, tossing it onto the floor. Untying his shoes, he took out the single cigarette he was able

to cram into his sneaker before he had hidden the three packs. Opening his window, he took in another wobbly breath of fresh air before grabbing his lighter from the desk, igniting it after three failed, fidgeting attempts, and lighting his cigarette.

He put it to his lips and inhaled. Head in his hands, Richie let out a quiet, relieved, “Shit.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter song—Letter to Hermione

Look at that idiot. Stupid, stupid, risk taking boy.

Also my super obscure old-cop-show references in there. Like does anyone actually watch CHiPs anymore?? do people even know what that is??? idk man idk

16. Chapter Sixteen: Pull the blinds and change their minds

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh man.

so.

yeah sorry guys.

Life has been kind of weird lately.

I've been working a lot (we were severely understaffed at work) and then when I graduated I sort of migrated away from writing for a while. I haven't picked up my laptop in months. I feel really bad cause I didn't want this story to be so sporadic, but this chapter gave me a lot of writers block.

But yeah life has been a lot. Working a lot. I did inktober for the first time ever (ehem. shameless instagram plug @catmogrady) but I've been trying to adopt healthier life stuff, and that involves losing some weight without developing an eating disorder like in the past, going to the doctors which has given me mega anxiety for the past 5 years (yes its been 5 years since i've been for a routine check up). so. I'm sorry.

thats all I can really say at this point.

Jonathan tapped his fingers on the steering wheel in time with the faint music playing over the car radio. His rhythm faltered as the tune changed, Nancy in the passenger seat fiddling with the stations and failing to settle on a song. She huffed to herself, complaining quietly to Jonathan that there was a lack of quality music on the radio. He smiled and returned the sentiment. In the backseat, Will stared out the window, watching shadowed trees pass by his sight. He did his best not to focus too much on the dark spots, keeping his eyes clear of any shadow that seemed to creep too much. He rubbed his nose with a sniff. "You don't have to stay, Jonathan. I was over their house yesterday and Richie was nice."

"I almost saw the kid get arrested today, Will," Jonathan said, giving his fingers a quick drum. "We're just going to drop off Nancy and thank Mrs. Wheeler. You'll get to see your friends tomorrow at school anyway." Will hung his head.

Nancy sighed. "God, don't remind me." She rubbed her forehead. "Jesus, Jonathan. What is this kid gonna be like at school?" With a sigh, Nancy crossed her arms, leaning her body to look toward Jonathan.

Jonathan shrugged. "Has he been like this the whole time?" Nancy pursed her lips.

With a hushed voice, she said, "All he does is stay in his room and come out to make everyone annoyed and then go right back. I have no freaking clue what he's doing up there." She shook her head. "And now this."

From the backseat, Will added, "Holly likes him a lot." He laced his fingers together, only unlacing them to pick at his hangnails. Jonathan eyed him in the mirror, watching his brother's familiar nervousness.

Nancy continued, "Oh yeah, the 5-year-old loves him—cause he acts just like a kid. I mean, God, you should have heard what he said at dinner—Will, you heard him." Will shrugged with a slight nod. "He swore at my dad. Not out of anger or whatever, but specifically because my dad told him not to swear. God, he just—," she waved her hands, "—he just can't shut up." She threw her hands down on her lap, letting out a sigh like she'd been stuffing her words away for a while. Jonathan let her breathe for a moment, switching his gaze between his brother, his girlfriend, and the road ahead. The headlights lit up the faded yellow lines of the median, letting him stay in his lane.

Once the frustrated sighs relaxed, he asked, "Was he like this when he was little?"

Nancy paused before once again giving him a shrug. "Kind of? Less chaotic—or maybe more chaotic? I think he's more focused when he tries to be annoying now and before he just didn't know when to stop

talking.” She rested her head in her hand and leaned it against the window. “Like—before I think he was acting out to get attention. But it’s different now.”

“Is it?” Jonathan asked, raising an eyebrow. Nancy sniffed. A silence fell on the car, the radio momentarily turning to static as they passed through a dead zone. Will played with his seat belt.

“I think he’s nice,” he mumbled to himself. Jonathan missed the comment as they drove for a few more minutes, arriving at the Wheelers house with a slow turn into the driveway. Nancy gave a dramatic groan, opening the car door and walking over to Jonathan’s side. Jonathan and Will exited, and the group walked through the freshly mowed grass up to the front door. Nancy let the group inside, calling for her mother.

Karen poked her head out from the kitchen, giving a small wave. “Hey Nancy, he boys.” The Byers both gave quick, respectful hellos, and Jonathan followed Nancy into the kitchen. Will, taking his shoes off at the door, stood still for a moment, searching throughout the house. Ted was passed out on the couch, looking comfortable and unmoving. Holly must have high jacked the television and turned it to a rerun of the Muppets. Gene Kelly was currently singing “You Wonderful You” to Miss Piggy, and Holly was swaying along with the beat. Will gave her a smile and a wave which she ignored. He kicked his shoes to the side, standing in the doorway. Mike was likely downstairs in his new bedroom. Will tugged at his sleeves, peering into the kitchen. Nancy and Jonathan were talking with Karen, Nancy visibly rolling her eyes and Karen giving a large sigh, her shoulders raising and lowering in one long wave. He heard the distant voices of Karen trying to convince Jonathan to stay for dinner. With his feet light, Will slipped back and climbed the carpeted stairs, holding the railing as he went. Once at the top of the stairs, he turned toward what he knew used to be Mike’s bedroom and creaked it open with a gentle turn of the doorknob.

Inside, Richie sat shirtless on the floor, his few belongings scattered round the room. He was leaning against his bed using a book as a table to write on, his headphones securely placed on his ears. Will could hear the music spilling from the Walkman, the familiar sound of The Who reaching Will’s ears. Richie’s eyebrows were scrunched in

concentration as he paused in his writing to shake the stiffness out of his hand. Will opened the door a bit more, and Richie noticed the motion. Removing this head phones, he said, "Jesus Christ, you guys can't just sneak up on a blind man like that." He shook he head. "One day you'll all be sued for ableism, and I won't blame them." Will gave him a small smile and stepped into the room. Richie squinted at him before recognizing Will and twisting his eyebrows for a moment. Will rubbed his arm a little before walking towards Richie.

"What are you writing?"

Richie paused a moment before giving a dramatic wave of his arms and stating, "I am writing of the horrors of this jail cell known as the Wheeler Household. No one is prepared to read of the cruelty I've faced here." He brushed an imaginary tear from his eye. Will raised an eyebrow.

"What, like making you eat meatloaf and go to church?"

"No—don't even speak of it. No one should be treated with basic discipline like this. It's abusive, truly." Will gave him a small chuckle. Richie smiled a toothy grin. "I'm just writing a letter to my friends."

Will paused a moment, biting his lip before saying, "You have friends?"

Richie laughed and put a hand over his heart. "Oh man. I felt that. Right here." He pointed to his heart and Will tried not to focus too much on the fact that he was shirtless. He gave another quiet, nervous laugh and looked down from his chest, noticing the bruising on his sides. They were a deep purple, certain spots looking like the aged yellow and green of old marks. Will looked away.

"My friends are gonna have to deal with school without the most amazing person ever making their lives great, so they need something full of references and jokes to hold them over until I go to see them." Richie put his pencil in his mouth for a moment. Standing in the middle of the room, Will shifted from foot to foot before taking a quick breath and sitting down on the floor. Crossing his legs, he placed his hands in his lap.

“So what, are you going to write a poem or something to them? A soliloquy?”

Richie removed the pencil from his mouth and pointed it at Will. “Right-o there kiddo. It needs to be dramatic and stupidly theatrical. Something that all my buddies will look at and shake their heads at and hate, but secretly love and remind them of their poor, lost Richie.” He leaned his head back against the mattress, flipping his pencil around his pointer finger. Will watched it spin for a moment, hunching his back and looking at the stretch of Richie’s neck. Blushing, he quickly turned his head away, staring at the pile of laundry on the floor.

“You should write an acrostic,” Will said. Richie raised his head from the bed and gave him a what-the-fuck-is-that look.

“It’s a poem where the first letter of each line writes out a word. You could write your friends names or something.” Will shrugged his shoulders. Richie’s eyes widened.

With a grin, Richie said, “Kiddo. That right there. That is genius. Perfect. Like—,” he nodded his head, “—this is a fucking golden idea. I can annoy my friends so much with that. Here,” he scooted closer to Will while grabbing a new piece of paper. “Here, show me how to write it.” He thrust the paper at Will, the boy silently taking the notebook paper and placing it along with a book on his lap. “They’re gonna hate this—I promise,” Richie added, a wide smile on his face. Will sniffed and forced a nervous giggle down and grabbed a pencil.

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“Mike, it’s almost time for dinner. Go wash up and get Richie and set the table.”

Mike rolled his eyes, closing his comic book, but not before placing a small piece of paper to act as a bookmark. Falling back onto his bed, he tried to ignore the commotion upstairs. Turning his head, he stared at the walkie-talkie placed on his makeshift bedside table. The turn of the doorknob at the top of the stairs interrupted his silence, and before anyone could yell at him again, he swung his legs to stand up, yelling, “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

Once in the kitchen, he saw Nancy stirring a pot for Karen, who was tidying up the counter with a washcloth. Jonathan was taking the plates from the cabinet. Mike furrowed his brow. "Is Will still at your place?" Being addressed, Jonathan turned toward Mike with a confused look on his face.

"What, he's not with you?"

Mike huffed and rolled his eyes, gesturing at himself to say an obvious "no". Nancy looked back at Jonathan.

"How come we keep losing that kid?" Mike heard Nancy say while he turned away from the kitchen, rushing up the stairs to his old room. As he got closer, Mike heard quiet murmuring voices coming from the room. Turning the doorknob, he saw Will and Richie seated across from each other, Richie wildly waving his arms and putting on some sort of accent.

"—it's the country bumpkin in him—y'know? I have to talk about his truck," Richie said using a poor southern accent.

"But—Richie you already talked about his truck in the first line. We should try and have a different attribute for each letter—," Will said, laughing in between words.

"Hey, that's a big part of his personality there. It—."

"You need to help set the table," Mike interrupted. Will and Richie whipped their heads toward the door, both surprised. Mike stood there, the hand on the doorknob clenched tightly around the metal. Richie pushed his paper and book to the side, slowly coming to stand.

"Auntie Karen requires my assistance?" Mike stared at him, expressionless. Will tidied up the papers for a moment before standing up, eyeing Mike. Richie bent down to grab a shirt with a loud grunt, straightening his back with a crack. Will slipped past Mike and down the stairs, Mike watching him trot to the first floor. Once Will was out of sight, he turned.

"What the fuck are you guys doing?" he asked.

Richie gasped. "Michael Bartholomew Wheeler."

Mike grimaced, “What—that’s not—what—.”

“How could you use such foul language in this house, you—,” he placed a hand over his heart, “beast.” Richie haphazardly threw on his shirt, groaning as he twisted his body to get it over his head. Mike shook his head and furrowed his brow.

“You know what, I don’t want to deal with you. Just stay away from my friend,” Mike said turning to leave.

Richie gave a snort. “What—you afraid I’m gonna steal him or something?”

Mike whipped his head back. “It’s not like you haven’t stolen anything before.”

Richie paused, raising his eyes to meet Mike’s. For a moment, they stared at each other, both refusing to break the gaze. Richie tipped his chin up so he was looking down at Mike, Mike staring up at him past his eyebrows.

From the kitchen, Karen called, “I don’t see a set table in here,” from the dining room.

Mike let his eyes stay on Richie’s for a moment longer before turning and heading down the stairs.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Cat People

TENSION

there is tension

again sorry

17. Chapter Seventeen: The teachers and the football stars

Notes for the Chapter:

so. Hi

Thank you for your patience. I have had major major writers block with this chapter. I rewrote it a couple times. I hated it. honestly I still hate it. But I want to continue and move past it, soooo here you go.

Also. sorry. I know i go mia all the time. I am wicked sorry

Nancy sat in her classroom, absently chatting with the blonde girl who sat behind her. For some reason Nancy could never remember her name, but she kept steady, semi intelligent conversation in a morning where she, Jonathan, and Steve didn't share the same first period. Nancy turned her head, resting her chin on her palm as she watched the other students filter into the room. Their English teacher, Mr. Padowski, had just arrived, slumping back into his wheeled desk chair with an audible sigh. His eyes shared the student's lack of enthusiasm for a Monday morning. The morning bell sounded, and Mr. Padowski rolled his shoulders with a mumbled grunt, and stood.

"Alright, everyone settle down." He pushed back his thinning hair with stubby fingers, and leaned against his desk with one hip. Nancy watched as he nodded at the other kids filing into the room, greeting some with their names and others with a yawn. Once the students took their seats, with eyes tired and shoulders slumped, Mr. Padowski grabbed his clipboard from in his drawer. He read off the student's names as if he didn't already have them memorized from teaching them for three years, raising his eyebrows after every name called, searching the small room for a waving hand or a resounding "here". After every name called, he clicked his tongue like he was surprised they actually showed up. He had just called the blonde girl (Donna

Mae, Nancy was reminded) when Mr. Padowski called, “Richard Tozier.”

Nancy stilled, eyes darting around the room. She had managed to avoid her cousin that morning, snagging a ride from Jonathan early since he wanted to develop some of his newest pictures before anyone else got a hold of the darkroom. Mr. Padowski paused as he normally would before squinting his eyes at the clipboard. Once again he called “Richard Tozier”, this time with the upturned voice of a question. Other students scrunched their eyebrows, turning toward each other in confusion. Nancy heard Donna Mae behind her whisper, “Who the hell is Richard Tozier?” Mr. Padowski placed his clipboard on the desk for a moment, staring around the room, his face matching the students’, before clicking again and resuming where he left off.

“Gary S—.”

“Oh look, I found you,” Richie announced as he swung the door wide open. He stood with a hand in his pocket, brushing his overgrown curls out of his face with the other. His bruises were healing, but purple blotches still splattered around his left eye. Richie strutted toward Mr. Padowski’s desk. “You would think that someone would tour the new kid around but,” he shrugged and patted the teacher on the shoulder, “I know, I know. Friendliness is hard.” He turned away from Mr. Padowski’s stunned face to squint at the other students.

“So do I just sit anywhere, or what?” Richie gestured to the kids. Mr. Padowski shook his head for a moment and brought his clip board back up to his face.

“Richard Tozier?” he asked with a click.

Richie gave a pursed lipped smile and responded, “You bet,” and tilted his head to the side. Then he clicked his tongue. Nancy grimaced.

Mr. Padowski sniffed before stating, “Yes, I remember—a new student. Welcome him, class.” He waved an unenthusiastic hand to the other teens, who responded with minimal “hellos”. Richie gave them a dismissive peace sign, still looking at Mr. Padowski. Nancy

watched as her teacher flipped through the attendance sheet before looking back up at Richie through his eyebrows. Richie clicked his tongue again. Unknowing, Mr. Padowski continued, "There is a seat right there for you." He gestured toward a chair by the center of the room, and Nancy closed her eyes with a sigh, realizing he would be sitting to her right.

"Of course," she mumbled.

Richie said, "Righto there, teach," before clicking once again and plopping unceremoniously into the chair, rummaging in his backpack and finding a notebook and pen, and leaning onto his desk with his arms folded in front of him. Nancy side eyed him and then ignored his movements as Mr. Padowski turned toward the chalkboard. She hurriedly jotted down the notes, changing the color of her pens for what was written on the board and what was her paraphrase for the teacher's spoken words. It was when his back was turned that she felt something tap on her head. On her lap landed a little piece of paper, and she glared at Richie, who was smothering a smile in his fist. She unwrinkled the piece of paper, reading rushed scrawl written in blue ink:

I CAN'T SEE FOR SHIT SO LET ME BORROW YOUR NOTES LATER
LOVE YOU

Nancy glared at him and continued watching Mr. Padowski slowly pace around his desk, occasionally pausing to look back at the chalkboard. Whenever he stopped, he would take a small breath, give a click of his tongue, and continue where he left off. On her right, Richie started to predict when Mr. Padowski would click, and do it along with him. Each sound caused Nancy to halt her writing, disrupting her rhythm. Nancy was bouncing her pen between her fingers when another paper landed on her desk. She heard the giggle of Donna Mae behind her as Nancy slowly turned back toward Richie, who furrowed his brow in forced, comedic thought and hummed in agreement at something Mr. Padowski said about sentence structure. Quietly, she unfolded the paper again.

CLICK

She crinkled it back up and chucked it at Richie's head. Mr. Padowski

turned his head back at the sudden movement, squinting at the students. They sat as naturally as they could, a few giving Nancy questionable glances. He scanned the room, clicked once more, and went back to the chalkboard. Nancy clenched her fist and tapped her pen on her desk once before returning to her notes.

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When the bell ending first period ended, Nancy managed to escape the confines of the classroom without chucking her backpack at Richie's face. He sent her a couple more notes through the class, and she successfully ignored them, brushing them onto the floor with a quick swipe. Once lunch period arrived, she met Jonathan and headed toward a table. Jonathan noticed her frustration and got her a muffin from the cafeteria. Nancy took it gratefully.

"How did I not know we would be sharing English. If we share any other classes I'm gonna scream." She violently stabbed her straw through her milk carton.

"Do you know his schedule at all?" Jonathan took his lunch out of his brown paper bag, placing its contents on the table. He opened two small Tupperware containers, one with celery sticks and another with peanut butter. He offered one to Nancy, and she refused it with a polite wave of her hand.

"No—we don't talk." She bit into her muffin, ignoring her bologna sandwich. "He just annoys the shit outta me, Jonathan." She looked at him, and Jonathan brushed a couple of chocolate crumbs from her face. Nancy blushed, and pushed off his hand playfully.

"I should take you out later. Get you out of the house," Jonathan said, resting his elbows on the table. Nancy gave him a smile. She was about to suggest a restaurant when Richie walked into the cafeteria. She groaned, resting her head on the table.

"Jonathan, whatever you do, don't turn around. Don't let him see us," she begged.

Jonathan turned his head for a moment, watching Richie squint his eyes, before saying with a laugh, "I'm pretty sure he can't really see

anything right now.” Nancy gave a huff that could be mistaken as a laugh. She raised her head to see her cousin looking around the room with a quiet expression on his face, and Nancy saw him shift between his feet, darting his eyes and shoving his hands in his pockets. She furrowed her brow, watching him look overwhelmed. Like the new kid. Nancy shut her eyes for a moment, sighing to herself, and raised her hand to wave him over when she saw Donna Mae standing next to him. She was twisting her hair and talking, and Nancy saw Richie’s face turn back into his comfortable, dramatic self. Donna Mae looked around the cafeteria for him, and when she spotted Nancy and Jonathan, the two made their way over.

“Shit,” Nancy said with another sigh. Jonathan gave her a smile and patted her hand. Richie arrived at the table, taking a seat next to Jonathan.

“Hey Nancy, you didn’t tell me Richie was your cousin,” Donna Mae said, still twisting a piece of her blonde hair between her fingers. Richie didn’t respond, but unpacked his lunch with a small smirk on his face. Nancy gave Donna Mae a forced smile.

“Well, we’ve been really busy moving him in, getting him settled, and keeping him from going to jail, so I haven’t had much time to talk about it.” Nancy took another bite of her muffin. Richie laughed.

“Innocent until proven guilty, Nanc,” he said, reaching over and taking one of Jonathan’s celery sticks. Jonathan didn’t stop him, but stared at him for a moment, surprised. Richie winked at him and dipped the vegetable into the peanut butter.

Donna Mae straightened her back, tugging on another piece of hair. She leaned in, pressing her arms together in an obvious attempt at making her breasts look bigger. “Oh wow, Richie. Already getting into trouble?” She flipped the piece of hair away.

“It wasn’t anything, just a misunderstanding,” he waved her off, chewing on the celery. Swallowing, he continued, “Actually, it was a great way to get to know Chief Hopper. I got a very,” he paused, smiling, “thorough introduction to him.” Donna Mae giggled and Nancy crinkled her nose.

Behind Jonathan came a call that had the group turn around. A tall student walked past them, pausing only to look at Jonathan and ask, "So, how's Zombie Boy doing?" The teen laughed as Jonathan rushed to stand.

"What was that?" he said, clenching his fists. The other boy stood a little straighter and stared Jonathan in the eye.

"Tough guy—did he infect you or something?" the boy snorted. He sized Jonathan up for a moment longer before turning and jogging toward another table. There, a group of friends laughed, each turning back to look at Jonathan. Jonathan took in a sharp intake of breath before sitting back down. Nancy shot the group her most heated glare before taking Jonathan's hand. Richie broke the silence.

"Um, okay, so Zombie Boy?" He raised an eyebrow. Donna Mae shifted uncomfortably, removing her hair from her fingers for a moment in favor of folding them together.

"That's what they call Will," Nancy said, rubbing Jonathan's hand with her thumb. He was starting to calm down as he kept his eyes away from the offending group of teenagers.

Richie's smile faltered. "Wait a second, they were making fun of Will?" Nancy nodded and Richie swiveled in his seat, squinting at the group. He turned back. "What the fuck is Zombie boy, though?"

Jonathan shook his head, "It's a long story." He and Nancy shared a quick look as Richie leaned in closer, obviously not accepting that as an answer. Jonathan sighed. "Basically, Will went missing in the woods last year for a week. In that time they found another dead kid, thought it was Will, and we had a funeral for him." Richie's eyes furrowed more, his fingers drumming on the table. Nancy heard Richie mumble something akin to "Mother fuckers," under his breath. He sat back.

"My friend Billy's little brother went missing a few years back," Richie said. Both Nancy and Jonathan's head swung to him. Richie face was pinched. Donna Mae leaned on the table toward him, once again pushing her breasts together.

"Oh Richie, did they ever find him?" She batted her eyes in sympathy.

Richie looked back towards the group of teens. "They found what was left of him." Jonathan's fingers tightened in Nancy's hand. They sat in total silence for a moment as Donna Mae shifted in her seat, eyes wide and hand covering her mouth. Richie ignored her, keeping his eyes on the other table. Then, a small smirk appear on the corners of his mouth. He leaned forward.

"So, that guy from earlier. What kind of car does he drive?"

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The end of the school day was slow coming, and Nancy grabbed her remaining books from her locker with enthusiasm. Jonathan waited with her, his own backpack full and swung over his left shoulder. Once they were all zipped up and ready to go, he and Nancy headed towards the exit, hand in hand.

"Do you want to stop for coffee anywhere before heading to my place," Nancy asked. Jonathan bumped her with his shoulder.

"I need to grab Will first, but that should be fine." He chuckled. "Y'know, the other day I saw Will drinking coffee." Nancy raised an eyebrow. "When his back was turned I tasted it just to see how much sugar he put in it." Jonathan waved his hand and said, "Nothing. Absolutely no sugar. Not even cream." Nancy shook her head and laughed.

"He's like an old man," she said with a smile. Jonathan returned it. Once outside the school doors, their calm was interrupted by Richie trotting toward them.

"Hey, hey. Can I get a ride?" He ignored Jonathan's attempt at response and said, "Super duper. Now don't leave just yet, we need to wait a second."

Nancy sighed, "Wait for what?"

Richie gestured dramatically at his ears, closing his eyes. "The music, obviously," he said. Jonathan opened his mouth to ask what music

they were waiting for, but Richie shushed him, keeping his eyes closed and his hands cupping his ears. Then, across the parking lot, a loud yell echoed.

“WHAT THE FU-WHO THE—FUCK,” came from someone. Both Nancy and Jonathan whipped their heads to see the boy from lunch circling around his car, fists clenched and hair unkempt. He repeatedly ran his hand through his hair, causing it to stick up in crazed angles. With repetitive huffs, he bent down to see his tires with wide holes cut into them. He stood again, hands coming up behind his head and weaving together for a moment before he started to yell again. “FUCK,” he yelled a few more times before walking around to the hood of his car. Nancy saw his eyes go wide and he turned around in a circle, looking at the surrounding students before yelling, “WHO THE FUCK KEYED ‘LITTLE DICK’ ON MY FUCKING CAR.”

Nancy and Jonathan whipped their heads back at Richie, who was still standing with his hands cupping his ears. He gave a long, drawn out sigh. “The sweetest symphony,” he said. Richie opened his eyes, grinning at the two, and smacked Jonathan’s shoulder. As he walked past them, Jonathan and Nancy shared a glance before watching Richie stand with his hands in his pockets, squinting at the scene, his satisfied smile pasted on his face. Nancy watched Jonathan study the boy, his eyebrows furrowed. Then, Jonathan shook his head, giving him a tiny, slight upturn of his lips, and patted Richie’s back.

“The car is this way, Richie,” Jonathan said.

With a wide, arm sweeping gesture, Richie responded, “Lead the way- I can’t see shit. These eyes are useless”

Jonathan gave a slight snort. “So what are you doing, with your shit eyesight?”

“Enhancing my other sense,” Richie answered quickly. Jonathan shook his head again. Richie pointed his finger at him. “You laugh, but soon I’ll be able to hear colors. Then who’ll be the one left out, eh?” Nancy stood behind for a moment, watching their casual interaction. Jonathan kept the conversation going, mostly letting Richie talk over him about something ridiculous, and Jonathan let

him. The boys gained distance between her and them, and Nancy stood still a moment longer, shifting between her feet, before jogging to keep up.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- Valentine's Day

Thoughts? Do you hate it as much as I do? Are you disappointed that after like 3 months of nothing this is all you get? Let me know!

18. Chapter Eighteen: I could escape this feeling

Notes for the Chapter:

hey look an update that didn't take like 4 freaking months what up with that

also I maybe reread this chapter like once so there are probably a lot of typos and stuff that I'll fix later and i don't have a beta reader or anything so i hope you guys can figure out what im doing

“Richie, I swear to god, if you kick the back of my seat again,” Nancy said, turning around in her seat and looking at Richie past her eyebrows.

He held his hands in front of his face. “Hey now, Nance—how do you know that it wasn’t Will? The kid is just practicing his karate moves, I swear.” Nancy gave another stern glare before whipping her head back to the front. She gave Jonathan in the driver’s seat a passing glance which he returned. Richie stifled a smile, tilting his head toward Will on his left. Will kept his hand on his mouth as he looked out his window at the passing trees, the corners of his lips turned up in seeming innocent ignorance. He flickered his eyes back toward Richie and shoved his growing smiling further into his hand. With a hissing laugh, Richie placed his feet on the back of Nancy’s chair, lightly and applying little pressure so she wouldn’t notice. He made a small wince, his ribs still aching, but did his best to keep his breath steady as he stared at the window. The passing woods was blurry, any branches looking like multiples. Richie squinted, but no amount of straining made his sight clear. He sniffed.

“Johnny boy, how freaking far away is your house?” Richie put his head back against the headrest.

“God, Richie, we’ve been driving for like ten minutes,” Nancy answered for him, shaking her head. Jonathan ignored him, coming to a slowed stop at an intersection. Richie spotted movement outside of the window, and briefly saw a bird perched on top of the stop sign. He swatted Will’s shoulder to get his attention.

“Will, you know what kind of bird that is?” Will scrunched his eyes and looked out Richie’s window. He shook his head.

“A sparrow? I don’t know, Richie,” Will shrugged. They both looked for a moment longer before the vehicle started to accelerate. Soon the bird was completely out of view. Richie tapped his kneecap.

“Stan—my friend from back home—is all obsessed with birds. He could probably tell what kind that was from like, a fucking feather or something.” Will darted his eyes back to Jonathan in the driver’s seat, before leaning in close to Richie.

“Did you finish the letters?” Richie smiled.

“Oh yeah—they’re amazing.” Richie ruffled Will’s hair, and the boy’s cheeks felt suddenly felt like when he forgets to wear sunscreen in the summer. “Thanks for your help with them, kiddo.” Will shrugged his shoulders again, a small smile parting his lips. Richie opened his mouth to speak when he suddenly whipped his head back to the window, staring at the blurry woods. His eyes darted, unfocused, as he willed himself to recognize his surroundings. A prickle traveled up his spine, landing at the back of his neck, tickling his hairline and making them stand. And as he watched the woods around him, he felt an overwhelming sense of familiarity. A feeling like damp sewers and putrid decay. A feeling that he wished to forget.

“What road are we on right now?” he asked, still staring at the window with a furrowed brow. Jonathan eyed him in the rearview mirror.

“Cornwallis,” he answered, and watched for a moment as Richie clenched and unclenched his fists.

Richie picked at his jeans, studying the passing woods, keeping his eyes peeled for any passing colors. Colors like bright red. Like the red of a balloon. Soon, the dark woods turned brighter, and Richie felt the cold, damp, familiar feeling lighten. His stiffened shoulders began to relax.

They pulled to the Byers house with a slow halt, Jonathan turning off the ignition. Nancy leaned forward. “Hey, your mom is home

already.” There in the driveway sat the Byer’s old Ford Pinto.

Jonathan said, “She must have gotten out of work early. She worked a double shift yesterday.” He and Nancy exited the car, Nancy pushing her seat forward to allow Richie and Will to leave out the passenger door. Will, slinging his backpack over his shoulder, trotted up to the front door while the others walked behind him, Richie shoving his hands in his pockets. When Will opened the door, they were greeted by the newly wallpapered walls and familiar stained carpet. Richie stood in the room, scanning the walls, his eyes falling onto the front wall by the window. He ignored Jonathan calling for his mother and walked over to the wall. There, again, fainter than before, was that prickle that crawled up his back. He placed his palm against the wall, rubbing it for a moment, when someone behind him said his name.

“We were just dropping Will off. Nancy and I are going to show Richie the neighborhood.” Richie whipped his head toward his name and saw Jonathan’s back in the next room over. Hands back in his pockets, Richie walked toward them, finding himself in a small, dimly lit kitchen. There stood the woman from the convenience store, the smile on her face dropping quickly as he edged into the room. Richie pursed his lips before raising a hand to give her a short wave. She looked back at Jonathan.

“Can I talk to you for a moment?” she said, taking her son’s arm and leading him to the living room. Richie turned his gaze to Nancy and Will, who remained in the kitchen. He picked at the hem of his shirt for a second, hearing the hushed conversation in the other room. He thought he caught the word “father” and “moved” and immediately raised his shoulders into a stiff hunch. Richie sniffed and stepped to the fridge.

“Anything in here I can have for a snack?” he pointed with his thumb at the fridge. Will nodded and Nancy rolled her eyes.

“What, you didn’t eat enough of Jonathan’s lunch already?” She crossed her arms. Richie grinned, feeling his smile tug at his stitches.

“Hey, you don’t get this tall and handsome from skimping out on meals,” he shrugged, gesturing to his physique with a wave of his

hands. Nancy blinked at him. Will opened the fridge and pulled out a vanilla pudding cup.

“We’re out of chocolate,” he said, averting his eyes from Richie with a light pink dusting his cheeks, and closed the fridge to go and grab a spoon.

“William, you are a true gentleman,” Richie said, giving Will a smile when he handed him an old metal spoon. “Thank you for this glorious meal.” He had just spooned a dollop of pudding into his mouth when Jonathan and his mother walked back into the room. She brushed her bangs for a moment, a move that Richie recognized in Will, and approached him.

“Richie, so you’re living with the Wheelers?” Joyce kept her arms crossed and protective. Richie nodded and swallowed.

“They are treating me like royalty,” he said, waving his spoon around. “Giving me food and shelter—all those basic human necessities.” Joyce pinched her eyebrows for a moment, and Richie kept a wide smile on his face. She shifted her feet.

“And you’re—,” she paused and glanced at Jonathan and Nancy, “you’re healing up alright?” Richie forced his smile to stay pinned to his face. Behind Joyce, Nancy turned her head to look out the kitchen window, her eyes attempting to focus on something far away from the stiffness in the current conversation.

Richie nodded enthusiastically. “Oh yeah, Auntie Karen keeps me stocked with pain killers and ice pads—not the she really needs to—my friends call and yell at me if I forget to take my pills and shit.” He took another casual spoonful of pudding and dared her to ask another question or comment. She flickered her eyes back to Jonathan and opened her mouth when Nancy interrupted them.

“Oh—Mrs. Byers, could I use your phone? I need to call my mom and tell her we’re not going to be home right away.” Joyce nodded at her and Nancy started down the hall. Richie gave Joyce a pudding-filled smile and followed Nancy to the phone.

“Look at you, trying to dodge that shitty conversation.” He snickered

when Nancy gave him a side eye. Richie heard more hushed words from the kitchen and leaned his back against the wall. He saw Will and Jonathan speaking to Joyce, and she looked back toward him and Nancy, her lips downturned. Richie made a pouty face. "I don't think you're boyfriends mom likes me very much." He faked a tear track down his cheek.

"You robbed her store," Nancy said matter-of-factly, picking up the phone from the receiver. Richie whispered to her "allegedly" and she rolled her eyes before looking back at the kitchen. Joyce stared at Richie, her eyes tracing his blotchy, bruised face and watching him roll his shoulders and wince. Nancy tapped the phone. "She might be worried about you, too." Nancy watched the humor falter on Richie's face, his casual smile lines turning stiff. He shoved one hand in his pocket, clenched his pudding cup tightly, and looked away. Nancy watched him for a moment longer before dialing home.

.....

"Holly wolly," Karen said to herself as she brushed the little girl's blonde locks out of her sleeping face. She had just picked her up from kindergarten, and the girl, after exerting the little bit of energy she had left running around the house, fell asleep on Ted's Lay-Z-boy. She looked so small curled up on the couch, her polished Mary Jane's still on her feet. Karen unlatched them and took them off as gently as she could before leaving Holly to rest. An hour or so of peace for Karen was more than appreciated.

Before she could return the shoes to Holly's cubby, the phone rang its chime. Making sure that Holly didn't wake, Karen stood slowly before tip-toeing to the reading nook with the phone.

"This is the Wheeler residence, Karen speaking," she said, instinctively grabbing the cord and giving it a single twist.

"Karrie?" asked the voice on the other line. And Karen, her calm smile twisting, felt a shiver of familiarity reach out to her from across the phone line. Her eyes widened, her eyebrows raising and her mouth gaping open before shutting quickly. Her silence was

accompanied by small breaths from the receiver, and Karen pursed his lips before responding.

“Maggie?”

“Hey, Karrie,” her sister said. “Can I talk to Richie, please?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—China girl

oh man oh man is that an unexpected cliffhanger??
If anyone needs a refresher, Maggie is Richie's mum
and Karen's sister

also I put a lot in this chapter and its all stuff that I've been waiting to start adding. Mike will be coming back into the story soon, don't worry, but I have been meaning to really develop the relationship between Nance and Richie. Do you guys think I write her ok? I feel like I make her a little more cold than she is in the show.

19. Chapter Nineteen: I'll stick with you baby for a thousand years

Notes for the Chapter:

hey look another soonish update way to go me
so life is still stupid stressful and i've been having to
make some major life decisions like I am possibly??
very likely?? moving to LA?? to possibly work for
Disney?? so that's happening
but yeah the thought of moving literally from the
atlantic to the pacific is terrifying for me, so its been
crazy right now
BUT HERE'S AN UPDATE I'M NOT AT ALL TRYING
TO AVOID THE SUPER SCARY STUFF THAT'S
GOING ON RIGHT NOW

“Maggie, what are you doing?” Karen stammered, her chest feeling solid and her body unmoving. She clenched her hand around the phone, feeling the cheap plastic stiff against her palm. “I thought- I thought you were still incarcerated.”

“Oh, Connie paid my bail—you remember Connie, don’t you? She married Geoffrey from back in high school?” Karen opened her mouth to speak when Maggie continued, “Oh, but you might not remember her. It has been a long time since you visited back home. Is Ted still treating you well over there? I always thought he wasn’t good enough to move away with. And my Wentworth has been—,”

Karen cut her off, “Maggie, please. Just,” she paused, “Maggie. You can’t. Why are you calling?” Karen listened to a small breath on the other line before Maggie gave a light sniff.

“I need to talk to Richie.” Karen pursed her lips, pinching them in a tight line.

“Maggie, why do you need to talk to Richie?” Karen leaned against the reading nook. She stood, tense and motionless except for her nervous, drumming fingers. Maggie paused on the other line again, and Karen wrinkled her forehead.

"I just need to speak with him, Karrie. I need," she paused. Karen stopped drumming her fingers, digging her fingernails into the palm of her hand. Maggie began again, "I am doing better. I started going to an AA group in Portland. And with Wentworth not here to enable me, I think that I can really make sobriety stick this time." Karen bit her lip. "Karrie, I really am feeling so much better. My mentor, David, is helping me keep track with the 12 step program. I am beginning to feel so much more at peace with myself but I just," she stopped again. Karen closed her eyes, listening to the breathing on the other line waver and wobble. Another sniff came and Karen clenched her fists harder.

"Please Karrie, I need to tell Richie—tell him how sorry I am." She sniffed again, "I know it's a couple steps ahead of where I am right now to apologize to people, but I just need to explain. I have to tell him that I am so, so sorry." Karen heard her take a gasping breath to calm herself. "Can you please get him for me?"

Karen closed her eyes, taking a steady inhale and exhale before opening her eyes again. For a moment she turned her eyes back to Holly's sleeping figure on the couch, watching her, and feeling the overwhelming love she had as her mother. As someone who carried her, birthed her, and vowed to care for her as long as she was able. And she felt a sudden anger at the thought of anyone attempting to harm the peace that the girl, or any child, had fallen into. Karen straightened her back.

"You can't speak to him," Karen said. She heard only silence on the other line, and continued, "He hasn't come back from school yet."

"Oh," Maggie said flatly, "Well, I'll call back in an hour so I can talk to—,"

"Maggie. You can't speak to him," Karen said with finality, her tone the scolding force she used with her children. The children she loved so deeply. Maggie sniffed on the other line. "He lives here now, Maggie. He has to get settled. I don't even think you're supposed to be contacting him now that he's in my custody." When the line remained silent, Karen continued, "You can't call back."

A moment's silence rang between the women, and Karen waited for a

response with her lips pinched and her eyes steady. Maggie took a breath.

“He’s my son,” she said. “He’s my son, and you can’t keep him from me.” Karen lifted her chin and defiance and tightened her grip on the phone. Maggie raised her voice, “He’s my son, Karrie. Not yours. And I’ll call him here if I fucking want to.” Karen opened her mouth to interrupt when Maggie started yelling, “HE’S MY BOY, KARRIE. SO GET HIM ON THIS GOD-DAMNED FUCKING PHONE I FUCKING—.”

Karen hung up with a loud click.

She stared at it sitting on her table, her breath coming in heavy ins and outs. She rubbed her face, only then realizing that she had begun to cry. A shuttered breath escaped her lips, and she let her stiff hands relax by her sides. Turning around, she spied Holly, the girl still sound asleep on the Lay-Z-Boy with her blonde hair splayed all over the arm of the seat. Karen sighed and stepped to return to the girl when the phone rang again. Karen whipped her head back, and snatched the phone off the receiver.

“Hello?” she said, waiting for screaming.

“Hey mom,” Nancy said on the other line. Karen heard Richie say a loud, “Hey Auntie,” and Nancy said back to him, “God Richie, you need to back up.” Richie chortled further away from the phone, and Karen closed her eyes and soaked in the sound of it.

Nancy continued in a clipped tone, “Jonathan and I are going to take Richie to town. Show him around a little bit. That alright?”

Karen nodded to herself, “That’s fine, Nancy. Just be home by dinner at—,”

“At 6:30, mom. I know,” Nancy interrupted. Karen took a breath.

“Keep an eye on him, will you?” Nancy replied a “yes” and Karen nodded again. “Okay. Thank you for letting me know, Nancy. I love you.”

Nancy responded with an, “I love you too, mom.” A distance from the phone, Karen heard Richie say “Love you, Auntie,” and Nancy hung

up the phone. Karen placed the receiver down, and brushed another tear from her cheek, a quiet smile threatening to break her pressed lips. With a deep breath, she walked back over to Holly.

.....

When they piled back into Jonathan's car, both Joyce and Will stood on the porch to watch them go. Jonathan gave them both a quick wave and a smile, and Richie rolled down the window as they left the dirt driveway, flapping his arms and blowing kisses. Richie sat behind Jonathan this time, putting his feet up against the seat with less force than when he was behind Nancy. She noticed and shook her head at him, crossing her arms. "So where are we going to go first?" Richie asked, tapping his knees to the music that faintly played in the background.

"Just around town. Show you the Hawk or the arcade."

"Coolio, Jonny boy," Richie said, tapping his hands with more gusto, the beat on the radio picking up. Richie hummed to the familiar tune, letting his head rock back and forth for a moment before a crook in his side made him stop. Jonathan eyed him from the rearview mirror.

"Bowie fan, Rich?" Jonathan asked, his own fingers drumming for a moment. Richie smirked.

"Well I'm a human with ears, so yeah," he said. "My friends and I saw him in Connecticut two years ago." Richie raised his hands in front of his face with a flourish and said, "It was transcendent."

Jonathan whipped his head back at him before forcing his eyes back on the road. "No way— how did you even get in? You guys would have been what—15 years old?" Jonathan shook his head, disbelief showing on his features. Richie shrugged his shoulders.

"Innocent Jonathan, if they bouncers at a Bowie show think you're a little twink, they let you in no problem." Jonathan startled a little, before letting out a breathy laugh. Nancy listened to the two boys silently as they spoke, trying not to let her confusion at the word "twink" show on her face. She furrowed her brow, placing her hand under her chin. Nancy watched Hawkins pass by her until they took

the turn that brought them into town. Jonathan started pointing out areas as they looked to park.

“... and that’s the church, which I figure you know about,” Jonathan said, pointing out his window. Richie gave a smirking nod. Jonathan parked near the church, letting the car come to a slow stop, and the three of them exited and walked in the direction of the arcade. Nancy slowed her pace and watched Jonathan point out other locations, giving brief descriptions of the sights when he realized that Richie couldn’t make them out too well without his glasses. The two walked together, going back and forth with jokes and smirks and Nancy felt her legs drag at the sight of two people who would not be affected by her absence. Nancy felt an awkward tension stiffen her shoulders, and she put her hands in her pockets. Her eyes turned away, dragging around her familiar town, and the houses full of people who didn’t notice them passing. Who wouldn’t notice if she stepped back and left the two in front to walk without her. She shoved her hand further in her pockets when she heard a call.

“Nancy, pick up the pace,” Richie called back to her. The two boys stood ahead waiting for her. Richie placed a hand on his hip. “I want to beat you at Donkey Kong.” He pointed with his thumb behind him at the arcade. Nancy shook her head and jogged up to them, placing her hand into Jonathan’s outstretched hand and clasping it tightly. He gave her a smile and she returned it before shooting a glare at Richie when he pushed her toward the arcade.

“Richie, I suck at video games,” she said when he grabbed her other hand and dragged her through the arcade doors.

“Yeah, me too,” he said with excitement, pulling them both around looking for Donkey Kong. Jonathan gave a laugh and a shake of his head when Nancy looked back at him, dread in her eyes. “Yes, found it,” he said as he rounded the corner to the sight of a small group huddled around the blue plastic of the game. There stood Mike, Dustin, and Max, their eyes intently watching the movements of Dustin’s fingers on the buttons and his character jumping over barrels on the screen. Mike was the first to notice them, his eyes flitting up quickly before his head whipped up and his eyes shut.

“Great,” he said, sarcasm falling from his lips and frustration on his

furrowed brow. Max looked next, confusion on her face for a second before realization finding her features.

“Hey, Cricket. Cricket’s friends,” Richie said, leaning his hip against the game. Nancy and Jonathan stood behind him, shifting on their feet, hands still held together. “Mind letting us have a go at beating that evil gorilla?” Mike gave him a piercing glare, crossing his arms. Max just raised an eyebrow.

“Not right now, Richie,” Dustin responded for them. “I’m going to beat Mike’s record and it requires complete concentration.” He jumped in place for a moment, his body reacting to the movements of his avatar.

“You’re not going to beat it,” Mike said, rolling his eyes.

Dustin smirked and toothless smile. “Yeah, just watch me, Wheeler.” Dustin leaned closer, pressing the buttons harder and jumping over barrels. Mike rolled his eyes again before looking at Nancy behind Richie.

“Why are you even here?” he asked.

Nancy looked at Jonathan for a second before answering, “We were just showing Richie around.”

“Yeah, well show him around somewhere else. I already have to see him at home—I don’t want to deal with him here, too.” Nanny raised her eyebrows. Max followed her action, adding widened eyes. Richie put a hand on his chest.

“Michael Wheeler. You wound me.” He swiped an imaginary tear from his eye. “And here I thought you were a welcoming little bug, but you’re so hurtful.” He sniffed, “Come come, Nancy. We’ll play Ms. Pacman instead and forget about this mean, angry cricket.” Nancy watched Mike’s hands clench as Richie pulled them toward an empty game and fished in his pocket for a quarter. Mike scowled at her for a moment longer before forcing his eyes back on Dustin.

Richie put a quarter into the machine and started the game before jumping to the side and pushing Nancy in front of the screen. “Here

you go, Nance. Show ‘em how it’s done,” Richie said, and the game began. Nancy raised her hands in confusion.

“Shit—how do I move it?” she asked, pressing buttons randomly. Jonathan told her to use the joystick, and she grasped it tightly, nervously scanning the screen. Richie pumped her up enthusiastically as she moved the bow-wearing yellow dot around the maze. At both of her sides were Jonathan and Richie, cheering her on- Jonathan with a hand on her shoulder and Richie with pumping fists- as Nancy dodged colorful ghosts with unskilled movements. When she ate one of the large dots, Richie screamed, “Now eat the fucking ghost fuckers,” louder than necessary, but in that moment it was the motivation she needed, and she steered Ms. Pacman toward the blue ghosts with a smile creeping up on Nancy’s lips. And for a moment she forgot everything but the two boys around her and the intensity of a game.

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6 o’clock crept up faster than Nancy anticipated, and she hurried Richie to finish playing his round of Dig Dug and rushed them out the door. She only paused to find Mike and tell him to head back on his bike, which he waved off with a quick hand and a roll of his eyes. The teens piled back into Jonathan’s car, and he dropped them off at the Wheeler house, giving Nancy a quick kiss and pushing Richie away with an exasperated smile when the boy attempted to get a kiss of his own. Richie snickered as he bounded into the house, toeing off his shoes and tossing his back pack onto the floor. Nancy kicked his shoes to the side as she walked into the kitchen.

Karen sat on a stool, watching a pot of soup simmer on the stove. Her eyes were glazed, her head placed in her hands. Nancy walked closer and Karen finally noticed her arrival. “How was he?” she asked, her eyebrows twisted and her eyes slightly puffy.

Nancy shrugged and stood silent for a moment. “He was fine,” she answered. “Is everything alright, Mom?” Karen looked at her for a long moment before pursing her lips and giving Nancy a smile and a shake of her head.

“I’m just tired, honey. Dinner will be ready soon.” Nancy watched her

mother for a moment longer, seeing her sunken shoulders forced back into an uncomfortable posture. Then, she turned out of the room and walked to the living room, ignoring her father passed out on his Lay-Z-Boy. When Nancy had sat down on the couch, Richie walked into the room.

“Nancy wancy, quick question for you,” he said. Nancy squinted at him and he continued, “It would be super nice of you as my second favorite cousin next to Holly.” She squinted harder, the corners of her mouth pinching.

“Could I borrow some lipstick?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song- Golden Years

lol Nancy ain't up with gay culture she dont know wut a twink is

(also this is totally a call back to a convo that Author_in_Silver_ink and I had back in like. Chapter nine)

but thoughts?? what about that Maggie she's a piece of work eh? And Nancy playing video games?

20. Chapter Twenty: Bet your life he's putting us on

Notes for the Chapter:

i use writing to escape the social situations going on in my house eeeeeyyyyyyyyyy

Also I didn't read this over so it's probably full of mistakes oops

"Why, Richie," Nancy asked, shaking her head and leading him into her room. She was quickly learning not to question the reasoning for his actions, but using her things was beginning to cross a line. Richie trotted up the steps behind her, a giddy, devious smile twisting his face. When she opened her door, she lead him to her vanity, pulling out her drawer and fishing out the few lipsticks she owned and the few she had subtly stolen from her mother. Nancy crossed her arms and Richie, smile still twitching on his face, leaned to look in this drawer. He moved some of them around, picking one light pink one up before tossing it back into the mess. Nancy scrunched her shoulders at his lackadaisical search through her items, her body only slightly relaxing when he seemed to have decided. Richie held a bright orange lipstick in front of his face, his teeth brightly shining as his smile flickered deviously for a moment.

"Be right back," he said as he scrambled out of the room. Nancy sighed and sat down on her bed, turning to her bedside table and hitting the play button on the portable cassette player Jonathan had gotten her for her birthday. The sound of *The Runaways* filled the room, and Nancy pursed her lips. She still wasn't quite sure what she thought of the band Jonathan had recommended, but she couldn't help but nod her head to the beat of the drums. Just when Nancy began to relax, Richie slammed her door open and strode in, several letters in his hands. Nancy crooked an eyebrow.

With a snigger, Richie snatched the lipstick and waltzed over to her mirror. With hands that could only be described as practiced, Richie uncapped the lipstick and applied it with a quick glide against his top and bottom lips. He leaned into the mirror and smacked his lips loudly before grabbing one of the letters and giving it a squished kiss.

“Richie, what the hell are you doing?” Nancy asked, shaking her head at him. He swiveled a hip and looked at her, the bright orange on his lips the focus of his face. When he smiled, Nancy was surprised to think that he pulled off the color. She shook her head again.

“I’m decorating the letters for my friends,” he responded. He then smacked his lips again and picked up another letter. “They’ll be so grossed out,” he giggled to himself and gave another kiss. “And this one to my lovely Eddie,” he paused to pick up the next letter, “gets three kisses.” He applied another quick later of lipstick and gave the letter a kiss in three of the corners, leaving one of them blank. He grabbed a pen off her desk and drew a little heart in the empty corner. Then, he held the letter in front of him, his mischievous smile softening into something Nancy nearly missed before Richie put the letter back down.

Nancy shook her head. “Who are your friends?” she asked, watching him give a kiss to the last letter and putting them all in a neat pile. Richie looked at her for a moment before snatching all of the letters and joining her on her bed. He tucked his legs underneath him to sit cross-legged, and laid the letters in front of them on the mattress. He lifted one in front of Nancy’s face.

“Stanley-the-manly,” he said, the name reflecting on the letter. Nancy pushed his arm back. “Super smart. Super straight laced. Like fucking buttons all the way to his neck—but,” he paused raising a finger, “is the sassiest little Jew around.” Nancy raised an eyebrow as Richie gave her a toothy smile before grabbing the next letter. “Mikey-Mike is possibly the nicest person ever. Like the kind of nice that makes you question every shitty thing you’ve done your whole life. Now, Ben,” he grabbed the next letter, “is also a mush ball but is stupid awkward and weeps at those cheesy crying-Indian commercials.” Quickly, Richie switched the letter again, raising it too close to Nancy. She rolled her eyes. “Beverly is by far the coolest human being to grace the planet—she once punched me in the face because I was being a trashmouth and I thanked her for it.” Nancy shook her head and let a small, breathy laugh escape her mouth. Richie grinned. “Bill stutters like a fucking skipping record but he’s another smart one. Not a bookworm like Stan, but street smarts. And Eddie, last by not least, a spaghetti after my own heart. He is my favorite

person in the world.” Richie ended his speech by turning Eddie’s letter around and giving it one more kiss before placing it back into his pile. He leaned back on his hands, sinking into the mattress.

“You guys seem,” she shook her head again, “close.”

Richie shrugged. “We’ve been through hell and back, of course we’re close.” He cracked his back with a grunt, and Nancy grimaced and kicked his knee. “What about you? Who’s the red-head?” Nancy stiffened, and Richie gestured to the corkboard that hung on the wall. There, weaved in between ribbons and pins, were several images of memories she never wished to forget. Deep, shattering memories that used to be snapshots of happy moments.

“That’s Barb,” Nancy said, her voice low and steady. Practiced. Richie turned his head back and squinted at the images. Photo booth shots. School dances. Poorly timed Polaroids. With her eyes focused on the pictures, Nancy didn’t notice Richie turn his head back, his still squinting eyes watching Nancy’s face lose expression and feeling.

“What happened to her?” Richie asked, recognizing that look. Knowing that distant gaze and silent frown. Nancy hunched her back slightly.

“She died a year ago,” she whispered. Richie pursed his lips, shifting on the mattress slightly to get a better look at the pictures. A heavy, awkward silence gave them both stiff shoulders and twitching fingers. The next track played quietly in the background, and Nancy broke the growing silence.

“Richie, you said,” she paused, and Richie looked back at her. “You said that your friend’s brother went missing.” Richie nodded.

“Bill’s little brother Georgie.” Nancy picked at the seam on her quilt.

“Did they ever find out what happened to him?” She didn’t look at Richie, her eyes focused on the blanket, trailing the different patterns with her eyes.

Richie sighed and tilted his chin up. “Would you believe me if I said an evil clown ate him?” Nancy looked at him past her eyebrows,

giving him a glare.

“Not really.”

Richie gave a snort, “Yeah, I wouldn’t either.” He shook his head, his hair shaking back and forth for a moment before settling into its usual, curly mess. Tense air surrounded the two, and for a moment neither of made a sound. Even their breaths were shallow. Hollow. Richie took a deep breath.

“Didn’t take you for a Runaways kind of girl, Nance,” Richie said. Nancy raised her head. A smile twitched on the corners of her lips.

“Jonathan got the tape for me—I still don’t really know what I think of them. They’re a little,” she shrugged, “yelly?” Richie smiled.

“See, you’re not listening to them right. You can’t just sit and brood listening to this music. This is fucking get-up-and-break-shit music.” Nancy’s eyes widened for a second before she gave Richie a glare. He raised his hands in front of him. “Not for real, Nance. Jesus,” he laughed. Shifting, he leaned forward, hands on his knees. “Hey, you guys have a record player?” Nancy nodded.

“My dad’s stereo is in the living room.” Richie grinned.

“Go down there and I’ll show you how to listen to *The Runaways* the right way.” With that, Richie snatched up his letters and hurried back to his room. Nancy furrowed her brow for a second before standing and making her way down to the living room. Holly was fully awake from her nap, sitting in the corner with her cabbage patch. Richie rounded the entrance and passed Nancy, a record in his hands. Nancy pointed out the record player, and Richie expertly removed the vinyl from its sleeve and placing it on the record player. Holly noticed his arrival, and stood near Nancy’s leg, shifting on her feet and waiting for music to play. A moment passed where Richie was positioning the needle, and suddenly the beginning guitar and bass of “Cherry Bomb” sounded through the speakers. Richie whipped around, a huge grin crinkling his eyes. He started to bob his head to the bass, moving his hips back and forth for a moment. Holly giggled by Nancy’s leg, and Richie rushed forward and took both her hands. When the singer started shouting the lyrics, Richie sang with her, pulling Holly’s arms

and making her shuffle around with him. Nancy stood shaking her head, a small smile threatening to creep on her face. When Holly started to dance along with Richie, he picked her up, jumping up and down, making her shriek happily. Still jumping, Richie held an outstretched hand to Nancy. She shook her head no, her hands in front of her body, but Richie just grabbed her arm and tugged her forward.

“Come on, the chorus is coming,” he said.

“Richie, I really don’t—.”

“Too late,” he yelled, and then he joined with the singer shouting lyrics, stomping his feet to the beat when Joan Jett sang *ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch* and giving one big jump when she yelled *CHERRY BOMB*. Holly laughed loudly, clutching at his head. Richie smiled at Nancy, and with a moment’s hesitation, she pursed her lips, took a breath, and stomped her feet with Richie. His face split into a toothy grin, and he spun around with Holly in his arms, making her blonde hair fly out around her face. Nancy spun around once with them, a shaking giggle leaving her mouth and a smile plastered on her face. When the chorus came around once again, she and Richie faced each other, stomping their feet in time and shouting at the top of their lungs. And for a second Nancy allowed herself to relax, allowed the music and movement to let her feel, and smiled with ease. She forgot to be annoyed with Richie.

She even liked having him there.

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Mike hated Richie being there.

When he stowed his bike in the garage, he heard muffled music and screaming coming from the house. Walking through the door and following the noise led him into a scene of his sister making a fool of herself, of Holly screaming at the top of her lungs, and Richie spinning around, nearly toppling over onto the sofa. Mike rolled his eyes, making an escape to the kitchen where his mother was plating pasta. He opened the fridge and grabbed the milk, filling himself a glass. “Aren’t you gonna tell them to shut up?” he asked, glaring back

toward the sound of Holly letting out another scream, this one accompanied by both Nancy and Richie.

Karen gave Mike a tired smile. "Let them have a moment, Mike. Dinner's ready anyway." She grabbed a plate, motioning for Mike to help her set the table. Mike bite the inside of his cheek and placed his glass down with a loud thump. He swiped two plates, and dragged his feet into the dining room, practically tossing the plates into place. Karen whipped her head up and gave him a stern glare, and Mike tried not to shrink.

"What, why can't they help?" he said with clenched fists. Karen pursed her lips.

"They were having fun. Go tell them dinner's ready," she said, crossing her arms.

Mike rolled his eyes, spinning on his heel. He went to the living room, seeing Nancy now holding Holly and swinging her side to side while Richie laughed, still jumping to the beat. "Dinner's ready. Shut off this stupid music."

Richie turned his head to Mike and a devious grin found his face. He rushed to Mike, grabbing his arms and trying to tug him toward Nancy and Holly. "Just finish this song with us, Cricket."

Mike clenched his fists and fought out of Richie's grip, struggling for a moment before wrenching his arms away from Richie. "God, no," he said, and when Richie reached to grab him again, Mike swatted his hand away and retreated to the dining room. He pulled his chair out, plopped down on the seat, and slammed his head on the table, groaning. Surprised, Karen asked if he was okay, and Mike ignored her in favor of letting out another exasperated groan. The music in the other room stopped, and they made their way into the dining room, sweat on Richie's brow and Nancy's breath coming slightly heavy. Nancy sat next to Mike and whispered, "Would it kill you to have a little fun?"

Mike lifted his head to look into Nancy's eyes. "It would kill me to look like a total idiot like you just did." Nancy's smile twitched, and Mike returned his head to the table, only lifting it when Karen told

him to stop brooding. He did his best to avoid eye contact with everyone at the table, ignoring the conversation that floated around the group. When he was finished with his spaghetti, he asked to be excused and left before Karen could answer him. He tossed his plate into the sink and slunk into the basement, throwing himself face first on his bed. Above him he heard Richie's voice rumble down to his level, and he gave another grumbling moan. He found the walkie-talkie and lifted it to his mouth.

"El, I hate him so much."

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—John, I'm only dancing

this chapter was fun to write. But i need to get back
to grumpy old Mikey
also another Richie's friends description was also a
good time he loves his friends so much,

21. Chapter Twenty-One: Your silhouette is so stationary

Notes for the Chapter:

Another quicker update cause I got the momentum now so why not.

Also another update on me: decided not to move to LA yet. I knew that if I moved out there without getting my masters, that I would likely never get it. I'm still figuring out what school I want to get my next degree at, so idk maybe LA has some killer school with an MFA degree in creative writing and education so I can teach middle schoolers like I've wanted to since high school.

Before Eleven put her blindfold on, she checked if Hopper was asleep. He let out periodic snores, and she poked her head into his room in their small cabin to check for movement. With a deep inhale of breath, he let out another droning snore. Eleven crinkled her nose before slowly shutting the door. She stepped to the TV, sitting cross legged in front of it, and switched the channel to the familiar fuzz that helped her focus. She had been getting better at finding without the use of the television, but she was a little tired from the spat she had with Hopper earlier. He knew not to make her eat asparagus. Why he suddenly started pushing vegetables onto her plate was a mystery.

Tying the blue bandana across her eyes, Eleven placed her hands on her knees, taking a slow, steady breath and letting herself fall. She opened her eyes in the black, standing completed still. She'd learned that running there amounted to nothing but a headache and hunger. Stillness. Focus. Listen and find. To her left a familiar voice echoed in the black nothing, and she stepped towards it. Mike was laying on his new bed, speaking quickly into his walkie talkie.

“—and now he's trying to turn Nancy into a weirdo like him. El—you should have seen them. They were dancing around like a bunch of fucking hippies.” He'd been saying that word a lot lately. Fucking.

When she asked Hopper what it was, he took away her dessert for the night. Mike continued, "He tried to drag me into it too. Like I would scream to that shitty music." He sat up, "He's a total mouth breather, El. You would hate him." Eleven walked closer, a smile on her face as she tilted her head to study Mike. His hair was getting longer. His nose was a little bigger, too. And his hands. She itched to take one into hers. To compare the length of their fingers. Mike rested his chin in his hand, putting his elbow on his knee. "You should come and visit soon. Sneak out through the tracks. I can meet you in the junkyard or something." His lips twitched. "Maybe Hop can adopt you early. Mrs. Byers said that he's been telling people at the police station that he's going to take in a foster kid." Mike picked at the seam in his jeans. "I want to see you." Eleven felt her arms raise, and she tried to reach for Mike. To place a hand on his cheek. But he faded like mist, and she was stuck with her hand reaching into the black. It clenched to a fist.

Behind her, another voice caught her attention, and Eleven turned to welcome the scene of Mike's old bedroom. In the room was a teenager, hunched over one of those music players Dustin showed her. A Walkman. He was fiddling with it, taking out batteries and tossing them into a waste bin. He grabbed one that was new and shoved it back into the machine. There was an icepack by his side, but it sat unused and melting. Eleven inched closer, stepping into the room. The boy brushed his hair out of his face, and Eleven noticed greenish bruises by his eye. They were on his sides too. She stiffened, seeing him sit up straighter and groan as he moved. She gave a light gasp when his face cringed in pain, and his eyes shot open. Suddenly, he stopped all movement. Even his eyes halted in place, glazing slightly. Eleven stooped to look at his face. The boy's mouth opened and closed before he said, "Someone is here."

Eleven stood quickly.

His eyes trailed the room, still slightly glazed, and she realized he was searching. She crouched back to him, trying to keep her hands from shaking. His hands scratched at the carpet. Eleven, taking a breath, said aloud, "Hello." His eyes suddenly found hers, and she watched his expression maintain focus. Like he saw her face. Saw her clearly. He opened his mouth and asked, "Where are you?" Before

she could answer, Eleven felt something drip on her hand. She looked down to see a drop of blood, and suddenly the black surrounded her, consuming the scene with the boy, and she ripped her bandana off.

Her nose was bleeding from both nostrils, and Eleven sat still, letting it drip steadily down her face. A tissue appeared on her right, and she turned to see Hopper sitting on the couch. His outstretched hand held a Kleenex, and Eleven took it gently. “You talk to Mike?” he asked, and Eleven nodded, pressing the tissue to her nose.

“You woke up,” she said. Hopper shrugged.

“You talk a lot louder when you’re finding people.” She looked back at the TV, watching the fuzz whip around on the screen. “Is he okay?” Hopper asked, folding his hands together. Eleven looked back at Hopper. “Mike. Is the kid alright?” Eleven nodded and Hopper huffed. “Then what’s got you all spooked?”

Eleven pursed her lips, swallowing, before finding Hopper’s eyes and turning to face him. She put her hands on her knees, focusing on Hopper’s face, which morphed from confusion to concern in a quick second. Eleven opened her mouth.

“I talked to someone.”

.....

“Where did you go?” Richie said, searching the room, his eyes darting to every corner, every shadowed crevice of the space. The feeling had disappeared, no reason or motion letting him know where the feeling retreated to. The presence vanished completely, leaving him talking into the empty space. But there was someone there. He knew it. And he felt the words spoken. A greeting. And curiosity. Not a feeling he was used to. Not the dread of the barrens or the well house. But something. Something for sure.

Richie stood, turning in a circle and listening to any creak of the house or murmur from those below him. Waiting. But the feeling didn’t return.

Richie clenched his fists, giving the room one more look around

before leaving, his icepack still sitting on his floor, and trotting down the stairs to the kitchen. Karen was finishing up the dishes, placing them into the dishwasher and closing it. Richie watched her for a moment before grabbing the fridge door and swinging it wide. Karen startled. "Richie—Jesus you scared me." Richie mumbled an apology and reached in the fridge for the orange juice. In silence he got a glass and filled it halfway with the juice before placing the carton back into the fridge. Karen crossed her arms for a moment and studied him.

"Is everything alright?" she asked. Richie lifted his head to see her worried eyes. He flashed a smile, pinching the corners of his lips as naturally as possible.

"Fine and dandy, Aunite," he said, taking a swig of his orange juice.

She look at him for a moment longer before saying, "Rinse out that glass when you're done with it—I just started the machine."

"Right-o there," he said with a dramatic salute, and Karen turned to leave the room. Richie put the glass back on the counter. "Hey, is this house haunted?" Karen turned back to him, giving him a crooked eyebrow and a wary smile.

"No Richie. This house isn't haunted." Richie shrugged and gave her another smile, and she shook her head and left the kitchen. Richie's smile quickly dissolved, and he tapped the counter with his pointer finger. He swiveled to leave with his glass when he saw the magnetic letters on the fridge. Two words were spelled with the magnets. The same words as when he arrived at the Wheelers. "HELLO" and "ELEVEN".

Richie knew the feeling of something watching him. Knew the feeling of horror when confronted with an unknown force. He recalled the drive past the woods to the Byer's house when he felt that familiar prickle of fear on his neck. Something was in those woods, but it wasn't what visited him in his room. He didn't feel like it would take him. Like he would go missing.

Richie whipped his head up and stepped into the hallway, searching the family photos that hung on the wall. Back near the stairs was a

photo of Mike with his friends surrounding a science project, smiles on their faces and a trophy in their hands'. Richie saw Will standing in the center. Will, who went missing in the woods last year. The woods where he felt it. And Richie, body stiff, said to himself, "Something is wrong with this town."

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Hallo Spaceboy
ooooooooooooooooo whats going on?? What is
this??? Richie could sense her??? what???

I live for Shiner Loser's club, so I am def exploring
that in this story (as has happened earlier in chapter
18)

22. Chapter Twenty-Two: One day I'm gonna write a poem in a letter

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello all i did not try hard enough on this chapter cause i am not a poet by any stretch. it was still kind of fun tho so I hope you enjoy my sorry attempts at poetry.

also i keep getting really stupid fanfic ideas but like the other day I was watching incredibles 2 with my niece and I suddenly got an idea for a fricken incredibles fanfic like what?? who writes incredibles fanfic?? apparently me cause for some reason I keep wanting to write it. idk

When Stan opened the blue mailbox, he was surprised to find a single, incredibly stuffed letter addressed to him. He forgot about the other letters and bills, turning the letter over in his hand. It was addressed to “Stan (the man) Uris” with a lipstick kiss placed in the lower right corner. In the upper left corner, the return address read “Hawkins, Indiana” and Stan gasped and ran inside. Turning the letter over again, he saw a note written on the back that said “please distribute among the other Losers”. Ignoring his father’s question about what came in the mail, Stan reached the family phone and immediately called the others.

Bill was the first to arrive, and he gave Stan’s father a hello that only included two stutters. Speech therapy was working. “Bill, you seen the others yet?” Stanley asked, and Bill shrugged his shoulders. Mike arrived next, then Eddie, who fiddled with the hem of his shirt when he entered the building. Stan’s dad always made him nervous but Eddie appreciated how clean he kept his house. Respect made Eddie more reserved than the Losers liked him to be. When Ben knocked on the door and entered the house, the group made their way to the backyard, sheltering from the sun under the singular maple tree. Stan ripped open the letter open, revealing four other letters stuffed into the small envelope, each one labeled with one of the Losers. When he handed the last letter to Bill, Stan unveiled the letter addressed to

himself. He read aloud, “Dear Stanley the manly, thanks for giving out all the letters to the others. You are a true gentleman and are highly underappreciated. Please read this letter to all of the others in a British accent—I’m not doing that—or else I will curse you with every one of the ten plagues of Egypt—no Richie, I’m not doing that.” He shook his head with a grin. “Each envelope contains a gift for you all, and I expect lots of chocolate delivered to me in my confinement here in Hawkins.” He paused, seeing the others staring at the kisses on their own letters. Eddie traced over the little heart in one of the corners with his pointer finger, a solemn smile softening his face.

Stan continued, “Hawkins is about as backwards and stuffy as Derry, but with less violent bullies and more looks of disappointment. My cousins are slightly less lame than I remember, but equally as fun to mess with. I assure you that I am remaining my trashmouth self.” Ben ripped open his letter, pulling out a single piece of paper. He scrunched his face for a moment before shaking his head and giving a gasping laugh. “One cool thing about Hawkins is this little loser kid my cousin is friends with named Will. He helped me write you all those amazing poems that I hope you all cherish for eternity—he wrote poems?” Stan looked over at the others, each one scrutinizing their letter.

Ben looked up and said with a smile, “He wrote an acrostic. Look at this,” he handed his poem to Stan, who read it:

“Boy who’s short and stout

Envelopes you in his beefy arms and you

Never feel so comfortable again”

Stan shook his head and handed the paper back to Ben who folded it up and placed it in the pocket of his shirt. Mike looked up next, his eyebrows scrunched and his grim crooked. He read his:

“Motion in the trucks engine

Invites you in almost as much as his

Kind smile brings you close until you feel

Energy and life around you.”

“Since when can Richie write poetry?” Mike asked, and Bill shrugged on his right.

“H-he did say a kid helped him w-with is,” Bill said. He leaned close to Mike, letting him read his poem aloud for him. Mike took the paper and gave a light cough before reading:

“Boy, just you wait

In time, everything will work for you

Little dreams of writing make even

Losers like you money.”

Bill barked a laugh as Mike chuckled at the last line. He handed it back to Bill, and the boy read it over again, another laugh tumbling out of his mouth. Stan flipped his letter over to find his own poem written in sloppy cursive—an obvious attempt at fanciness. Stan read:

“Sit on your stoop

Take out your binoculars

And watch and wait.

Nearby calls summon you

Leading to a quiet place,

Ending the journey to silent solitude

You nerd go watch your birds.”

Stan pursed his lips. “I think he might have run out of ideas with mine,” he said with a snicker. He flipped it back over to see if there was anything he missed on the letter before looking back up at the others. “Hey Eddie, what about yours?” he asked before he noticed Eddie’s face. The boy was obviously struggling to maintain his composure, his shoulders severely hunched and his lip quivering. Ben

laid a hand on his shoulder, and Eddie sniffed and handed him the poem. Eddie shook his head and wiped his eyes as Ben read:

“Edible eyes that beg for kisses

Daringly stare you down until

Deep, you fall in their abyss

In comfort, knowing that

Eager, caring hands wait to catch you.”

The group simultaneously gave dramatic “aw”s while Eddie turned around, rubbing his face. They all reached towards him, and Eddie only fought back for a moment before letting them envelope him in a tight group hug. “Alright—fuck guys,” he said, pushing them back lightly. Mike smacked his shoulder, and Eddie rubbed it in slight pain afterwards. “Did he say anything else?” he asked Stan, wrapping his arms around himself and stepping closer. Stanley looked back at the letter, straightening the edges that became crumpled during their hug.

“I tried hard on those, so you better frame them and keep them with you always. When I come back to visit, I expect you to have them memorized and a poem in return—and Ben, I don’t need any fucking January embers.” Ben blushed and looked at his shoes, smiling. “I’ll call you all soon. Hugs and kisses. Tell Mrs. Kaspbrak I’ll feel her up soon.”

“Beep beep, asshole,” Eddie mumbled, a grimacing smile pinching his lips. Stan handed the letter to Eddie, who reread it, his eyes darting down the written words before reaching the end where Richie wrote a couple more hearts, two with little arrows sketched through them. He shook his head for a second, pushing prickling tears back in his eyes when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder. Ben leaned close, a comforting, knowing smile on his face. Eddie smiled and sniffed.

“You think Bev got a poem too?” Eddie asked.

Ben nodded, “I’m sure hers is the most annoying.”

.....

“Richie you bastard,” Bev said, ripping open her letter and skimming past the silly comments about how happy she must be to be rid of him. “Now there is no competition for Ben—you fucking duck have him all to yourself,” he wrote, and she grinned at the paper, mumbling “idiot” to herself. When she finished reading the note, she flipped it over to find a poem for her. It said:

“Boundless confidence

Energetic temper

Vibrancy more brilliant than the sun

Even in darkness you

Rival a fire

Lighting up the heart of everyone.

You’re my favorite redhead.”

“You fucking softy,” she mumbled, resting her chin on her hand and reading the poem over again. Tapping the table, she leaned back to look in her living room. Her aunt was fast asleep after working a double shift, so Beverly tiptoed to the phone, dialing the number Richie had given all the Losers before leaving, and listening to the dial tone resound over the line.

On the other line, Beverly was welcomed with, “Thank you for calling the Wheeler household, this is Karen.” Bev leaned against the wall.

“Hey Karen, this is Beverly. I’m a friend of Richie’s.” Bev heard a gasp.

“Oh yes, Richie has told me a lot about you,” Karen said. Beverly raised an eyebrow to herself at the almost giddy way Karen spoke.

“Knowing Richie, he probably told you I was an ex con or something,” Bev said with a smile, and Karen laughed over the line.

“All good things—I believe he described you as the amazing, talented, and beautiful Beverly.”

Bev smiled, “Aw shucks, he must like me a lot.” Karen gave another laugh over the line. “Is he there? I got his letter and wanted to thank him.”

There was a pause before Karen responded, “Actually, he’s out with my daughter and her boyfriend right now. Would you like me to have him call you back?” Bev shrugged her shoulders.

“I can try back again later—I have to head to work soon.” Beverly heard what she thought was a kid in the back ground as Karen affirmed to her that Richie will be home after 6 o’clock. Bev nodded, eyeing the wall clock by the calendar, guessing that it would be best to call again after she got home at 9. Her eyes trailed over the calendar for a moment before a smile curled on her face.

“Actually Karen, I wanted to talk with you about something.”

Karen paused for a moment before responding with a cheery, “Okay, what did you need, Beverly?”

Bev pursed his lips before grinning. “When does Richie’s summer vacation start?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Blue Jean

what did you think of my crap poetry?? and Beverly and Karen interacting?? and what up with Bevs last question?? she tryin to make plans or something?? who knows (i do). Eddie's poem was the easiest one for me to write for some reason but its also my favorite of the bunch.

23. Chapter Twenty-Three: Sway through the crowd to an empty place

Notes for the Chapter:

what?? another quick update??? what is up with that what gives??

also side note but important side note: Stranger Things 3 is coming out in THREE DAYS HOLY MOLY but I wanna let you all know that this story will not be following this upcoming season. I started this story right after season 2 was released, and that's where it sort of picks up from.

but anyway I AM SO STOKED FOR THURSDAY GOD BLESS AMERICA

“You’re absolutely certain you actually talked to this kid?” Hopper said, mustache twitching nervously. Eleven nodded, crossing her legs in front of herself and manually switching the television to the frequently used white noise. Sitting back, she reached for her bandana, but found it clutched in Hopper’s hand. He twisted it like he was trying to wring water out. Eleven furrowed her brow before turning to face him.

“You’re scared,” she said. Hopper shook his head and let out a sigh.

“Kid, last time you made contact with something in your head-void-thing the gate was opened.” Hopper clenched his fist around the bandana tighter. “I don’t want you to get hurt.” Eleven pursed her lips before letting her head gently lay on Hopper’s knee for a moment. Silence drifted between them. Hopper gave another sigh, and Eleven outstretched her hand. He gave her the bandana.

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When Richie and Nancy returned home, they were welcomed to the scent of chicken kiev roasting in the oven. Richie took a dramatic

inhale through his nose and Nancy passed by him, heading to the kitchen. In the living room, Mike did his best not to roll his eyes at the sight of Richie. Ted was passed out on the couch, so Mike took the opportunity to change the channel before Ted's dad-sense told him it was no longer playing a golf tournament and he shook himself awake. Mike switched it to He-man and turned to go back to the couch when he saw that Richie had sat in his seat, a waiting smile on his face. Mike scoffed, rolled his eyes, and whispered, "Move—I was there first."

"Move where? All the other seats are taken," Richie said, still smiling, and gestured widely at the seats occupied by Holly's dolls. She arranged them by height, laying them all in a row and giving anyone who attempted to move them sad, puppy dog eyes. Mike clenched his fists and took a steadying breath.

"Richie. Move."

Richie uncrossed his legs and patted his lap invitingly, raising his eyebrows.

Mike groaned before stomping away. Ted snorted awake and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before settling back into the Lay-Z-Boy. With a giggle, Richie stood and followed Mike into the kitchen. He was resting his head in his hands, mumbling something to himself and attempting to ignore the fact that Richie had followed him. Karen opened the oven to check on the chicken before shutting the door and setting her kitchen timer for 5 more minutes.

"Dinner is not quite ready," she said, turning to see an exasperated Mike and a giggling Richie. She turned her head to Richie, giving him a solid glare with a raised eyebrow. "Richie, stop annoying Mike."

"Thank you," shouted Mike, raising his head from his hands. Richie laughed again.

"Hey, I'm just trying to—," he said, halting mid-sentence when something prickled down his spine and skittered over his skin. Richie felt his breath escape his mouth and his ears shut out sound for a moment, hushing the world around him.

“Trying to what? Ruin my life?” Richie was thrust back into the present, and he turned to see Mike glaring at him, the boy tapping his fingers on the counter. Richie forced a smile on his face.

“Exactly,” Richie said.

Mike glared.

“And if you’ll excuse me, I must retreat to my corner upstairs to plot more ways to ruin your life, Mikey, as that is my one goal in this cruel existence known as life.” With a bow, Richie left the kitchen and Mike’s clenching hands that were obviously tempted to snatch a salt shaker and chuck it at his head. Richie bolted upstairs, ignoring the pain that still lingered at his sides, and shut his door behind him. In the silence, the feeling came again, hovering by his side this time, not on his back. Richie turned his head slowly to find empty space beside him. And yet.

“Hello?” he said, his voice hushed. And the greeting was returned like a gentle, subtle breeze. The kind of breeze you see ruffle the treetops but never reaches the ground below. “Are you alive?” he whispered, his fingers shaky and his flesh chilled. The empty space responded, not the clear greeting of before. It was like hearing someone take a deep breath of air before plunging into water. A deep, oxygen rich breath.

They were alive.

Richie nodded in the silence, fingers twitching.

“Who are you?” Richie asked. The response was nothing familiar. How do you translate a name? Something so abstract? Richie wiggled his fingers, shifting on his feet, back and forth. The prickle was still settled by his side, seeming to wait for another question. “I don’t understand,” he answered, and the answer was the same as before. Shaking his head, Richie walked to the desk, snatching a piece of paper from one of the drawers, and sat on his floor with a book under the paper. Hunching over, he uncapped a pen with his mouth, placed it to the paper, and asked the question again. “Who are you?”

Closing his eyes, he let a moment pass before the response floated to

him. It was cold. Calculated. Something practical. Richie did his best to interpret this, and, squeezing his eyes shut, he wrote the feeling onto the paper. Repeated it over and over. The feeling settled, and Richie relaxed his hand, letting the pen fall uncapped at his side. Opening his eyes, Richie held the paper in front of him, eyebrows twitching.

There were no words. Nothing clear. Just lines. Straight, vertical lines, rushed and scribbled. Repeating until they covered the page.

Pursing his lips, Richie looked up at the empty space. "I don't get it," he said, hands crinkling the corner of the paper. "Jesus—what's your name? Who are you?" Richie leaned forward, waiting for a response, when suddenly the feeling vanished like last time. Like a door slammed shut. Richie groaned, running his fingers through his hair and pounding his fist into the carpet. "Damn it." Wincing, Richie shook his hand around, feeling pain on his knuckles and, surprisingly, tingling in his nose. Looking in his empty room once more, Richie stood, leaving the paper on the floor, and trotted down the steps to the kitchen where Karen was just removing the chicken from the oven. He grabbed a tissue, giving a quick blow and turning to toss it in the garbage when he spotted the word. So calculated. Practical. Spelled out in bright colored magnets. And Richie ignored the world for a moment—the scent of chicken kiev, Mike walking past him, the blood spotted tissue in his hands—and he understood.

Eleven.

.....

When she took off the bandana, Hopper was on her in a moment, giving her a towel for her dripping nose and a hand on her shoulder. "He didn't hear you, did he?" Eleven pressed the cloth to her face for a second before raising her eyes to look at Hopper.

"No, he heard me. But he didn't know what I was saying." She placed the towel on her lap and Hopper leaned back, his eyes still pinched and studying.

"Okay, so how do you know he wasn't talking to someone else?" Hopper asked.

Eleven gazed at him again, her eyes almost challenging. “He asked me questions.” Hopper sighed, rubbing his face quickly and leaving his hand against his mouth. Eleven picked at the seam of the towel. “He asked me what my name was.”

“Yeah, you were yelling ‘Eleven’.” Hopper bounced his knee for a second. “So, what—is he,” he paused, “is he like you? Is he from the lab?” Eleven furrowed her brow and shook her head no. “So, he’s just some random kid?”

Eleven pursed her lips and shrugged.

“Do you have any idea who he is? Where he is?” Hopper leaned forward, clasping his hands together. Eleven thought back to the scene, the stairs he climbed. The room the boy sat in. The familiar photos on the wall.

“He lives with Mike,” she said.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- Lets dance

oh man whats going on Richie my boy what is this?

Also what Richie was attempting to do with the paper is called automatic/spirit writing and if you are someone who believes in spirits (like me, got that Christian upbringing ayooo) i DO NOT recommend this technique or anything used to communicate with the supernatural. You don't know what you're talking to bra you gotta be smart about these things

BUT ANYWAY wow a quick update in the week of Stranger Things 3

24. Chapter Twenty-Four: Sailors fighting in the dance hall

Notes for the Chapter:

told you this update would be a little longer. Thank you all for your patience!

Also for some reason there is an excessive amount of swearing in this chapter. whoops

Richie listened to the phone dial only twice before it was picked up on the other end. “Hello, this is Eddie Kaspbrak,” answered the other line and Richie smiled to himself before speaking.

“Mom’s at book club?” he asked, and a light gasp came over the line. Richie leaned on his elbows on the table, resting his chin in his hand.

Eddie said, “We have around a half hour until she comes home.” Richie smirked.

“So, phone sex is a go?”

“Christ, Tozier,” Eddie responded, and Richie snickered to himself. “Do you really want your aunt to think we’re having phone sex?”

Richie shrugged his shoulders. “She’s actually out grocery shopping. It’s just me and lil Mikey in the house right now.” Richie wiggled his eyebrows even though Eddie couldn’t see. “This is our chance, Kaspbrak.” Eddie groaned.

“Richie, shut the fuck up.” Richie heard a smile in his voice and returned it. “I got your letter.”

“Aw, was it everything you could have hoped for?”

“It was cheesy, for sure.”

Richie nodded. “So it lived up to your expectations. Please cherish the poem forever—memorize it, frame it, eat it.”

“Richie—the fu—.”

“Get your fucking 5 basic food groups from my artistry, Eds.” Richie heard Eddie give a sighing laugh and pictured him leaning headfirst against his wall, twirling the cord around his finger. Richie closed his eyes for a moment, letting the image sink into him, a smile turning the corners of his mouth.

“So are you getting along with everyone?” Eddie asked. Richie shrugged again.

“Nancy and her boyfriend aren’t too bad. She still needs to loosen up, though. And little Holly woly is adorable.” Eddie hummed on the other line. “Mike is fun to pick on.”

“You aren’t picking on him too much, are you? Richie—you have to get along with your family. What if they don’t like you and want to punish you by, like, taking away your medicine? Oh god, have you been taking your medicine? You need to take it with meals and—.”

“Eds, you’re doing it again.” Richie shook his head to himself and heard Eddie take a quick inhale and exhale. “You worry about me too much.”

“Well, if you fucking took care of yourself, then maybe I wouldn’t have to worry.” A pause settled between them before Eddie said, “So, what’s been going on there? Other than groceries?” Richie hunched his back a little, picking at the tabletop. He looked around the surrounding room, noticing an absence of his cousin. He tapped on the phone once before speaking.

“Eddie, promise not to freak out.”

“Richie, what’s going—.”

“Eddie. Love of my life. Spaghetti after my own heart. Promise you won’t freak out.” Richie waiting for a moment, hearing Eddie mumble a couple words, cutting them off and grumbling to himself.

“What’s going on?” Richie tapped the phone again.

“Do you remember when we went on the fieldtrip to that lighthouse?

On the little island?”

“The Portland head light, yeah I remember.” His voice was forcefully steady, and Richie felt a momentary smile twitch on his face. He could picture Eddie’s furrowed eyebrows and his pinched lips. Richie wanted to kiss the expression away.

“You know how we all felt the old dead keeper guy? And how he sort of talked?”

“Joseph Greenleaf?”

“Holy fuck, Eds—how do you remember all of those names.”

“Richie,” Eddie interrupted, his voice wavering slightly. “Is your new house haunted?” Richie shook his head no.

“No, it’s not. But there’s,” he paused, “I’ve been talking to some little girl like how we talked to Greenleaf.” Silence was on the line, and Richie picked at the table again before resting his head on his arm. “Eddie, say something.”

Eddie broke the silence and said, “You think she’s like us?” Richie shrugged to himself.

“I don’t know. She must be.” Eddie mumbled something under his breath. “Something weird is up with this town, Eds.” Richie let another silence float between them, and Eddie swore on the other line. A slam made Richie startle in his seat, and he turned his head to see Mike stomping into the room.

“How the hell are you still on the phone?” Richie stared at him.

“Uh, well I’m obviously having intelligent conversation, Mikey—you might not know about it.” Richie heard Eddie ask what was going on the background, but Richie ignored him for a moment.

“Hang up—I need to use it.” Mike crossed his arms, staring Richie down. Richie glared back.

“No?” he said, like it was obvious. “Wait your fucking turn, Cricket.” Mike’s face began to turn a deep red, a scowl turning his features.

"I need to call Will and Dustin—they're not picking up on their walkies and we need to meet up. Give me the phone." Richie's eyes darted around in confusion.

"Mike, I think your nerd friends can wait a second."

Eddie on the other line said, "Richie, who is that? What's going on?" Richie started to respond to him when Mike yanked the phone out of his hand and slammed in on the receiver. Richie jumped to stand, whipping his head to Mike. Mike crossed his arms again.

"What the fuck, Wheeler," Richie said, his voice frighteningly steady. Mike tried not to step back.

"I need the phone."

"If you didn't notice, I was using it, you pint-sized asshole." Richie clenched his fists at his side. Mike's face contorted, but he kept his eyes right on Richie, his stare challenging. "And, another piece of news for you, I fucking live here now. So I get equal rights to this god-damned phone as you do." Mike scoffed.

"You don't get equal rights to anything—you're staying here because my mom feels guilty that her sister is a drunken asshole." Mike took a brave step forward as Richie felt his hands shake in anger. "We're letting you live in this house for free, so maybe be a little more grateful." Richie furrowed his brow.

"How about you do this—why don't you go ride your tiny-ass bike to your friend's house and talk to them in person, you know, how I FUCKING CAN'T?" Richie's voice broke into a yell, and Mike moved back slightly. "You think I moved to nowhere Indiana for shits and giggles? You think I thought, 'oh y'know what will really fuck with my cousin that I've never met—I'll get myself fucking hospitalized by my own FUCKING FATHER and then leave everything I have ever known and loved to move into his house' and just hopped on the nearest bus and barged in?" Richie walked forward, and Mike backed up until Richie barricaded him into the wall. "Do you really think I would have come to live with a shithole like you if I wasn't forced to?" Mike forced his eyes to stare into Richie's, his fingers twitching.

“So, what—are you going to beat me up now? Just like your drunk dad?” Richie’s nostrils flared, his fists clenched at his sides and his breath shaky. And Richie opened his mouth to speak when the familiar prickle started on his neck, and Richie knew that the girl was back, watching him. Richie took a deep, steadying breath before leaning close to Mike, their noses practically touching.

“Whether you like it or not, I live here. Get over it.” With a turn, Richie left Mike leaning against the wall and ran upstairs to his room, slamming his door closed and heading straight to his desk for his cigarettes. His shaking hands struggled with his light, and he only just managed to light a flame when the feeling returned. He took a long drag, the smoking stinging his lungs and calming him with each exhale. Still facing away from the feeling, Richie said, “Eleven.”

What felt like a breeze responded, cold and reserved. “I’m fucking mad, I know. I’m not mad at you,” he said, taking another inhale of the cigarette. “Eleven. That’s your name, right?” Richie felt a beat of something, like a shaky hello. Like someone waving from afar. “What kind of name is Eleven? Are you some kind of alien or something?” The feeling didn’t respond, and Richie watched the ash from his cigarette fall onto his floor. “Shit,” he mumbled, bending down to try and pick up the ash, but it dissolved in his hand. “Whatever—if you’re an alien or some random kid who shines like us. You make sure you stay away from that asshole downstairs.” Richie snuffed his butt, and fished another cig out of the box, placing it in between his lips and lighting it in one shot. “You hear me, kiddo?” He turned around to face the feeling, but it had already retreated.

“Jesus Christ,” Richie mumbled, leaning back on the desk and rolling his shoulders, a light pain shooting from his rib. He rubbed the spot for a moment, knowing he needed some ice. Or to take his medicine like Eddie told him to. Richie rubbed his face, breathing deeply. Staring down his half-used cigarette, he watched it slowly burn, the smoking floating up toward the ceiling. He furrowed his eyebrows at his addiction, and said to himself. “I am not like him.”

He snuffed cigarette and threw the rest of the pack into the garbage.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- Life on mars?

Return of the title song means important stuff is going down.

Did this go in the direction you thought it would? i was really excited to write this chapter. This starts the REAL animosity between Richie and Mike. Before it was just Richie being his usual self and picking on Mike, but now their dislike for each other is more solidified.

I hope you enjoy the angst!

25. Chapter Twenty-Five: I'm afraid of the world

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm starting to get to a place i was totally looking forward to writing. Lots of movement and tension and bad decisions coming to you guys.

Eleven shoved her bandana off quickly, her face scrunched and confused. Hopper was there, as he always was, worriedly combing his fingers through his hair. She turned to him, her face still pinched, and said, "They were fighting."

"Who?" Hopper asked, shifting forward.

"Mike and the boy." She looked toward the wall. "He told me to stay away from Mike."

Hopper gave a dry laugh. "Jesus," he mumbled. "You don't listen to me when I tell you to keep the door open when he's here—like you'll just stay away." He sniffed, scooting closer to Eleven again. His beard was more disheveled than normal. He always unconsciously fidgeted when Eleven went finding people, ruffling his beard or twisting the cuffs of his sleeves. She pretended not to notice how nervous he was on her behalf. "El, I don't think it's good to keep searching for this kid."

Eleven folded the bandana messily, not bothering to properly line up the corners. She hummed at Hopper in response, and he nudged her shoulder. "I'm serious—we don't know anything about him."

"We know he is related to Mike," she responded.

"We also know he doesn't like Mike," Hopper shot back, taking a breath and reaching his hand out for her bandana. She placed it in his hand and watched him stand.

"Hopper, what is 'drunk'?"

Hopper stopped, turning back to her, startled. Eleven swallowed and continued, "Mike asked the boy if he was going," she paused, "going

to beat him up like his drunk father.” Hopper’s eyebrows shot up.

“Mike said that?” Eleven nodded. “Christ,” he shook his head. “El, ‘drunk’ is,” he stopped, gesturing in the air, his hand stalling before falling at his side. “Um, there is this stuff called alcohol that, if you drink too much, can sort of,” he paused again, his eyes darting around. “It can change your personality, I guess? It makes people stupid. Sometimes it makes people violent.”

“So the boy’s dad had the alcohol and hurt Mike?” she asked, suddenly standing straight, her fists clenched tightly. Hopper held his hands out to stop her.

“No, Eleven—the boy’s dad had alcohol and hurt the *boy*.” Eleven opened her mouth before shutting it quickly. “That’s... that’s probably why he lives with Mike now. To get away from someone who was hurting him.” Eleven turned to look behind Hopper.

“Like the bad men,” she said. Hopper sighed and nodded.

“Eleven, I’m serious—stop looking for this boy. Even if he’s Mike’s cousin, we don’t know what he can do. What his abilities are. You need to stay safe.” Eleven connected her eyes with his for a moment, huffing and turning to head into her room. “Eleven,” Hopper called back, but she ignored him, closing her door behind her. Once in her room, she flopped down on her mattress, shoving her face into her pillow for a moment before it became hard to breathe. Then, she turned onto her back, tracing the cracks on the ceiling with her eyes, finding the few cracks that met and looked a bit like a kitten. And she closed her eyes, listening outside her door for Hopper, but he must have left her alone to “brood” as he once called her behavior. She waited until the room outside was filled with the sound of the television turning on, Hopper flipping through a few channels before settling on the news. Then, Eleven reached for her radio, putting the volume down low, and turning it to the sound of fuzzy air before laying back on her bed and closing her eyes, slowly sinking back into the inky blackness.

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Dinner was quieter than normal. Richie ate in silence, completely ignoring Mike seated on his left. Mike sat as far away from him as possible, shoveling scoops of rice into his face. Dustin, Lucas, and Max had arrived a few minutes earlier, and Karen reluctantly allowed them to join in dinner, tossing another box of rice pilaf into a pot of boiling water. The group all sat around, trying not to notice the obvious tension circulating around the two boys. Only Ted seemed unaware of the uncomfortable silence, reading his newspaper at the table and pausing periodically to squint his eyes at paper before flipping it to the next page. Karen gave a light cough before placing her fork down on her plate.

“So Richie, how do you like your new glasses?” she asked, and Richie looked up at her through his new spectacles. They were thinner frames than his previous pair with a tortoiseshell pattern around the lenses. Karen thought they made him look handsome. Richie gave her a shallow smile.

“They’re definitely better than not being able to see,” he said, lifting his fork and pointing at her with it. Karen’s mouth twitched in a quick smile and Mike gave a quiet snort.

“You sound really grateful,” he said sarcastically. Lucas halted his fork in front of his mouth, sharing a look with Dustin. Richie scowled.

“I am grateful. Overflowing with thanks,” he growled, not turning his face to look at Mike. Nancy eyed them both, slowly chewing her food.

“Funny, I couldn’t tell,” Mike answered, taking a bite of chicken.

“Would you rather I go over and kiss your father’s feet for buying his abandoned nephew glasses so he can actually function?” Max furrowed her eyebrows, darting her eyes to Lucas who shrugged and looked back at Mike.

“I would rather you still be back in Maine with your real freak family,” Mike said, sipping his water. Karen’s eyes went wide.

“Michael Wheeler, that’s enough,” she said, placing both of her hands

on the table and turning her gaze to her son. “Richie is our family—he always has been.” Mike sniffed, rolling his eyes and taking a bite of his food. Richie pursed his lips, staring at his plate and picking at his hangnails. The room went silent again, and Dustin, Lucas, and Max all took an awkward bite simultaneously. The dinner continued like that, the group silent, looking between Richie and Mike seated next to each other. Richie was about to take a bite when he stopped before it made it to his mouth. Silently placing his fork back on his plate, Richie pushed back on his seat, mumbling a “be right back” before leaving the table, running up to his room. Karen stood to follow him, calling, “Richie—where are you going?” Max made an awkward face at Lucas, who returned the look, watching Richie seemingly retreat up into Mike’s old bedroom. Mike was the only one who continued to eat, taking another silent bite of food.

Once in his bedroom, Richie turned to the door, waiting for anyone to follow him up the steps. When he heard only silence, he looked around the room. “Eleven, you’ve got to stop coming at random times.” A wave of answers came to him, slightly sloping and bending like an apology. Richie sighed.

“Jesus, I should thank you. I was about to leave the table anyway.” He slumped onto the ground, ruffling his curly hair before resting his arms on his knees. “Living in this house is starting to fuck with me.” Eleven didn’t say anything, her presence there, the steady current of something reaching Richie’s senses. “You live in a loud house like this?” he asked, taking off his glasses to rub at his eyes for a second before putting them back on.

The answer was like someone shaking their head and moving the wind around them out. It brushed through him lightly with no malice. Richie shrugged. “Well, where do you live?” he asked. Then he closed his eyes as he waited for her answer to arrive. It floated over to him like it was brushing past trees and settling on the ground like a leaf lifted and lightly dropping back down. Richie squeezed his eyes tighter, turning his head to the side in confusion. The motion of the wind didn’t cease, but turned into a dimming light that sent a chill down his spine. It felt like when he sat in the dark in his backyard back home. Like when you start imagining every creature sneaking just out of your eyesight.

"Kid," Richie paused, "do you live in the woods?" Affirmation floated to him and Richie opened his eyes, staring at the empty space in front of him. Slowly pushing himself to stand, Richie clenched his fists at his sides. "In the woods where Will went missing?" Richie thought back to the road where he first felt the prickle of fear—Cornwallis? Was that where it was? Richie stepped forward to the invisible girl. "Do you need help? Are you safe?" The feeling of her presence was beginning to fade, falling backwards and away from him. "Shit—stay where you are. I'm coming to get you," he said, and when the feeling disappeared completely, he turned to leave, yanking his door wide open. Richie made it to the front door before Karen spotted him.

"Richie—what are you doing?" she called, quickly standing. Richie looked back for a second.

He said to her, "I need the car," before snatching the keys of the hook they hung on. He ignored Karen's wide eyes and opened the door, running to the Volkswagen and lighting the ignition. Not noticing the people chasing after him, not hearing Karen and Nancy call after him, Richie backed out of the driveway, turning the steering wheel roughly and accelerating away, his foot firm on the gas.

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Eleven had barely ripped off her bandana before she ran out of her room to Hopper. Her nose was still dripping down her chin when he saw her standing in her doorway, surprise on her features. "What's going on—what did you do?"

Eleven gulped, "He thinks I live in the woods." Hopper stood.

"You told him where we are?" he asked, eyes wide. "You told the kid I just explicitly told you not to talk to anymore where we are?" Eleven shook her head no.

"I said that I live in a cabin in the woods, but he thinks I'm missing. Like Will was missing." Hopper grunted, brushing his hair back before putting his hat on his head. Hopper stared at her for a moment, his face full of silent anger, and Eleven did her best not to let his frustration at her disobedience get to her. "Hopper—he's going where Will went missing to find me," she said, and Hopper's eyes

went wide again, his beard twitching.

“He knows where Will went missing?” he asked, and Eleven nodded back. The chief’s face paled for a moment before he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Shit, he’s going to the lab.”

Turning on his heel, Hopper called back to Eleven, “Stay here—I’ll stop him,” and slammed the cabin door behind him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- I'm Afraid of Americans

No one knows how to handle Mike and Richie's stupidity and Richie is out here making rash decisions and Eleven is starting to regret not listening to Hop and Hopper just wanted to relax and watch some TV

But nooooooo I gotta give you guys angst

26. Chapter Twenty-Six: It's the terror of knowing what this world is about

Notes for the Chapter:

Back at it with Richie making bad decisions. Also my laptop is dying so I don't have time to read this over again before I post it so I'm sure it has tons of mistakes again but GOTTA POST

will reread later and fix up the errors.

"Shit shit shit," Karen whispered, watching Richie take off too fast for them to catch up. She and Nancy shared a scared look and turned back to the house. Nancy got the keys for her father's BMW, looking back at her mom and nodding. Karen said, "Follow him, Nancy—I'll stay here and wait in case he comes back."

Nancy ran to the car and backed out of the driveway, turning to follow the direction Richie had gone. Karen turned away from the door, brushing her hands worriedly through her hair and pacing back and forth. Behind her, Max, Dustin, Lucas, and Mike all watched as Ted walked up, placing his hands on Karen's shoulders. "Nancy will get him back, Karen," he said, rubbing her shoulders firmly. Karen sighed, resting her face in her hands for a moment. Mike tapped the other kids, gesturing that they follow him into the basement. The others followed willingly, all retreating down the steps and away from the chaos upstairs.

Mike flopped down on his bed, groaning loudly as the others settled on the seats near him. "Of course—now he's run away." He dragged his hands down his face. "Now mom is going to be freaking out all night. Thanks Richie." Dustin sniffed beside Mike, placing a pillow on his stomach and picking at the seams. Lucas leaned back in his seat, letting out an agreeing sigh, shaking his head at the sound of Karen's pacing above them. Max broke the silence.

"So wait—are you not concerned? At all?" She stared at Mike, her light eyebrows furrowed. She darted her eyes between the other two boys present. Both Dustin and Lucas looked back at her, shrugging.

She shook her head. “Mike?”

Mike groaned, “Max, everything has been so stupid since he’s been here.”

“So, what? Your cousin just ran off and you guys have no idea where he is.” She widened her eyes, still darting them between Dustin and Lucas, seemingly looking for support. “And what the hell was that at dinner? Do you guys hate each other now? I thought he was just annoying?”

Still laying down, Mike gestured with his hands, “We did kind of fight earlier today.” He plopped his arms back down on the bed.

“Wait—you guys had a fight?” Lucas asked, leaning forward. Mike shrugged.

“Yeah. He was taking forever on the phone talking to his girlfriend or something, so I hung up the phone and he got in my face and—.”

Max interrupted him, “You hung up his call? What the hell, Mike.”

“I’m sorry, did you miss the ‘he got in my face’ part?” he said, sitting up to stare at Max. She scoffed and crossed her arms at him.

“Mike—you are such an asshole,” she said.

“What?” Mike responded, “What the hell did *I* do?”

“What did you do, Mike? Jesus—have you thought at all about how you’re cousin feels about all of this?” She rolled her eyes at him when he raised his hands in front of himself. Then, she turned to look at the other boys. “Do any of you have any idea what Richie is feeling?” Lucas avoided her gaze, locking eyes with Mike who dramatically rolled his eyes. Dustin spoke.

“Kind of.” They all whipped their heads to Dustin who shrugged his shoulders. “When my parents split, my dad got the house, so my mom moved us out here to Hawkins. I really didn’t want to move here at first.” Dustin brushed his nose with a finger. “It sucked before I started hanging out with you guys.” Max nodded her head at him.

“And what about you, Mike?” She leaned toward him, and Mike rolled his eyes again. “You ever moved across the country? Or been separated from a parent.” She laughed, “How about this—you ever had your parent beat you up?” Mike stiffened, looking away from her. “Christ, Mike. You let Eleven live here without a freaking thought—a random girl you knew nothing about. But your own cousin you won’t help?”

The room went silent, the pacing upstairs still a steading thump thump. Mike flopped back on the mattress, scratching his eyes before letting his hands rest on his stomach.

Lucas asked, “You have any idea where he went?”

Mike sighed. “No clue.”

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“Christ, where is this kid,” Hopper mumbled, driving down side streets around the lab. There were no signs of beat up teenagers on the streets, only seeing trees and the occasional fallen trashcan. Anything fallen made Hopper turn his head in fear. What if this kid could move stuff like El? What if he could kill people with a twitch of his head or a snap of his fingers? Hopper sighed, tapping his thumbs against the steering wheel as he took a turn onto Cornwallis. A mile or so down the road he saw a car parked on the side of the road. Not entirely unusual, but there was something familiar about this car. It looked like the Wheeler’s car. Hopper pulled over near it, slamming his car door shut behind him. Only then he realized exactly where he was standing.

It was where Cornwallis and Kerley met. Right where Will went missing.

“Shit,” Hopper said, taking off into the woods.

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Richie stumbled over fallen trees in the woods, brushing past mossy rocks until he found an old trail. Following the footpath, he closed his eyes, feeling that familiar fear creeping forward. It shivered up his

back and made the hair on his neck stand straight. He was getting closer.

He stepped off the path, tracking the feeling with each step forward until he was forced to stop. In front of him was a huge chain link fence with barbed wire decorating the top. Richie swore to himself, pressing his head against the fence. Beyond that border, the feeling increased, and Richie shuddered again. His fingers wiggled at his sides, his body physically rejecting the feeling surrounding him. But if Eleven was telling the truth, then she was stuck back there. Richie set his eyes and walked along the fence, looking for weakened ground so he could crawl under or a break in the fence that he could climb. He dragged his hand along the fence, his fingertips almost grazing the feeling. Sticky. It felt sticky and sick. Like when you sweat with fever. And yet it was cold, like when snow drips down your back. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Hey—KID,” came a call behind him, and Richie whipped his head back to see the police officer from the church running up to him. Richie swore again, stiffening and shuffling his feet backwards. “Get away from the fence.”

“What are you—some kind of fucking stalker?” Richie said. With the feeling surrounding him, he struggled to find any snarky words to throw at the police officer. The officer slowed his run, stopping ten feet away from him suddenly. Like he was uncertain of what Richie’s next move was going to be. Richie clenched his hands.

“Listen, officer stalker. I have reason to believe there is a kid lost beyond this fence,” Richie said, pointing with his thumb at the chain link fence. “She’s a little girl and she needs help, so let’s jump this stupid fence and help her.” The officer furrowed his bushy eyebrows and huffed.

“Kid, there is no one over there,” he said, taking a tentative step toward Richie. Richie stiffened and took a subtle step back.

“Yes, there is. Isn’t it, like, your oath as a police officer to investigate these claims? Christ, you back woods cops are all the fucking same,” Richie said under his breath. “The police in Derry were useless, too.” The officer took two steps toward him.

“Richie—it’s Richie right?” Richie squinted his eyes at him for a moment, but said nothing. He turned his eyes back toward the fence. No weak spots. No lose ground. Damn it. “Richie, there is no girl over there. It’s abandoned—.”

Richie interrupted him, stepping forward, “Why are you here? Were you just on a fucking walk? You’re patrolling this fence, aren’t you? Are you hiding her in here, you sick fu—.”

“She’s not here, Richie.” The officer clenched his fists and took a breath and Richie narrowed his eyes at him.

“Then where is she?”

The officer huffed again, rubbing his face and mumbling something like “these fucking teenagers” before turning his face back to Richie. “There is no girl. Go home.”

“I know there is something bad out there,” Richie said, pointing past the fence. “I know there is a girl. And now I know that you know who the girl is.” The officer’s face went stony and Richie stepped forward again. “So where is she?”

“Go home.”

“Where is Eleven?” Richie said, taking another step toward the officer. They stared at each other, both challenging in their gaze until Richie’s eyes darted behind the officer.

“Holy shit—what the fuck is that?” he yelled, and the officer quickly whipped his head back. And in his confusion, Richie turned back toward the fence and ran.

Behind him he heard a quick, “Fuck,” before the officer started to run after him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- Under Pressure
(I think technically this is a Queen song but its got
Bowie so it works don't question me)

We're getting to the stuff I've been wanting to get to for so long right now! I'm excited!

Also it was fun having Max yell at Mike. That boy needs to think a lil

Also also I was going to keep going with this chapter but it was getting a little long so sorry
You're gonna have to wait for more again oops

27. Chapter Twenty-Seven: Never had a good thing going

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm back soon cause I was very very excited to write this chapter.

Again unbetad so whoops there will be mistakes that i missed.

Karen leaned to look out the window at any passing cars. None. The streets were quickly dimming, the street lamps starting to light onto the roads. Richie had been gone for almost forty minutes, and Nancy had yet to come home either. Brushing her bangs, Karen pursed her lips, pressing her face into the glass to look further down the road. Nothing. She gave a shaky sigh, ringing her hands together. Suddenly, the phone started to ring, and Karen trotted to pick it up. "Hello," she answered, hoping to hear Nancy's voice.

"Um, Hello," said the voice, and Karen squeezed her eyes for a moment at the male voice on the line. "Um, my name is Stanley. I'm a friend of Richie's."

Karen nodded, putting her forehead in her hands for a moment. "I'm sorry, Stanley, but Richie isn't here right now. He went—he went for a walk. With my daughter." Karen heard the voice say something muffled before it continued.

"Is—I'm sorry. Is he okay? Is he safe?" Karen furrowed her brow. Stanley said, "Of course he's fine. I'm sorry." Karen thought she heard the boy mumble something about "feeling something" before he said, "Just have him call me when he gets home, please." Karen nodded.

"I'll let him know you called, Stanley." The boy said goodbye and hung up, and Karen placed the phone back on the receiver before returning to stare out the window.

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Richie panted, ignoring any remaining pain in his side as he bolted away from the officer. He heard the man following him, huffing and yelling at him to stop, and Richie sped up at the sound. Ahead, he saw a break on an elevated section of the fence, and Richie set his gaze, running straight for it. He jumped on the fence, catching the links and climbing quickly to the top. The officer started to catch up, screaming at him to get off the fence, but Richie focused on getting through the barbed wire, deciding to go over the wires rather than squeeze under them. Placing his left foot on top of wire, he used his weight to bend it down and swung his right leg over the lowered fence. “Fuck,” he whispered, seeing that the officer had caught up to him. He tried to jump back off the fence, but he twisted his leg too quickly, and his knee caught on one of the barbs, sinking into his skin and ripping off when he fell down to the ground on the other side. “Christ—fuck,” he winced, clutching his knee for a moment before hearing the officer’s call again.

“Shit—kid, get back here,” the officer yelled from the other side of the fence, grabbing the chain links and staring Richie down. Blood started to ooze between Richie’s fingers, but he set his jaw and stumbled to stand. Then he ran.

The closer he got to the feeling, the less Richie could notice his surroundings. Was he still running through woods? Or was he wading through icy water? His breaths were quick, thick in the saturated air. It felt like he was inhaling toxins with each huff, and the feeling caught in his through. Richie coughed twice, his ribs aching and rejecting the motion. He stumbled for a moment, giving out another cough, when suddenly the earth slipped beneath his feet. He slammed onto his back, falling onto the ground as it continued to slide down a decline. When he settled at the bottom of the hill, Richie swore to himself, pain shooting up his side. He hissed through his teeth as he forced himself to sit up, hanging his head. He adjusted his new glasses, grateful that they were unharmed in the fall, and that was when he saw it. The building.

It stood as a fortress, the walls concrete and the windows tall and unnerving. Some of the walls had graffiti, silly small town tags decorating the walls. The doors were shattered, glass sparkling on the ground and reflecting off of the setting sun. But Richie noticed none

of this. He only felt the overwhelming dread that settled in him the moment he set eyes on the building. *Eleven is in there* Richie thought, and, pushing off the ground, he started to run to the building again.

The doors were incredibly broken, large panes of glass still spread on the ground, crunching underneath his feet as he stepped into the dark building, limping slightly on his injured leg. Inside, it looked as if the place had been ransacked. Either that or vacated very quickly. Chairs were on their sides, boxes and papers scattered around and when Richie stepped further inside, all of his senses were rushed with the overwhelming scent of old, staining blood.

And in the building he felt the deaths of hundreds.

He nearly sunk to his knees at the weight of it. So many had lost their lives in this space. He turned his eyes to the lobby. There were so many in just this room. One splayed right in the middle of the floor, bloodied and ripped apart. Richie’s skin went cold, his mouth dry. Shaking, he forced his eyes closed, huffing in shallow breaths until his feet started to move forward again. And he walked into the darkness, the cold taking him down turns and corridors, winding him in the maze of the building. His eyes stayed closed, one hand remaining on the wall as he dragged himself forward, barely noting the texture of the stipple walls and the blood dripping down his leg. When he came to an open door, Richie turned into it, and the cold soaked into his bones, seeping through every pore. Forward he walked, glass crunching under foot until he stood still in front of a solid wall. He placed both his hands against the concrete, its texture newer than the plastered walls of the hall ways. He was there. The heart of the feeling. And it was just a wall.

“What the fuck happened here?”

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Hopper cursed as he watched the boy run away from him, further into the woods toward the lab. “Jesus Christ,” he yelled, staring up at the barbed wire the boy had climbed over. He saw a strip of jeans hanging from one of the barbs, small dots of dark red blood soaked into the fabric. “Shit,” Hopper rubbed his face, watching Richie keep running, seeing him favor his right leg just slightly. Turning back,

Hopper ran as fast as he could back to his police car, whipping open the door and lighting the ignition. Foot heavy on the pedal, he sped down the road until he reached the turn to head to the lab, his tires screeching at the speed of his turn. He rushed to the gates, seeing that they were left open just big enough that someone could slip through the open bars. Hopper snatched his flashlight and took off to the building, clenching his fist tight around the metal. He saw a curly head of hair entire the building, and he ran.

Once inside the building, he saw only darkened hallways and fallen chairs. The boy was nowhere to be seen. Hopper lit his flashlight, shining it down the halls. For a moment, he felt all the emotions of the last time he'd been in the building crawling up his spine, and he turned to look at the ground where Bob once laid, ripped apart and drowning in his own blood. Hopper's light shook, and he swore at himself before taking off down the hallway that led to the gate. "RICHIE," he yelled, hoping to hear footsteps or a resounding call, but no sounds returned to him. The halls were pitch black except for his flashlight, no windows allowing any light to filter into the building. *The kid didn't have a flashlight* Hopper mused, rubbing his nose and continuing forward. The kid was walking in complete darkness.

When Hopper inched closer to where the gate used to be, he felt his fingers twitch and his brow perspire. Fear prickled on his neck, and he turned into the room, seeing the shattered glass where the dogs broke through. Saw the gages and keyboards, the notepads and beakers of the old scientists who helped create this terrible doorway. Shining his light toward the sealed gate, Hopper startled, letting out a whispered, "Fucking Christ," when he saw Richie standing right where the gate used to be, once in total darkness. Richie was resting both hands and his head against the wall, his shoulders hunched and trembling. Hopper scolded his shaking hands and took a step forward. "Richie, we need to get out of here." Richie's back straightened, and he turned to look toward Hopper, his face ashen and his eyes wide.

"What happened here?" he asked, his voice shaken and quiet. Hopper could see his hands trembling, still planted against the wall. The boy gulped, "So many people died." He looked over Hoppers shoulder

and whispered, "Some are still here." Startled, Hopper whipped his head back, shining his light on the empty hallway he was once standing in. Turning back to Richie, he saw the boy still looking in the hall, his face almost sunken and cold.

"Richie, I'll explain—but Christ. Get out of there." Richie's eyes connected back with Hoppers until the boy's mouth pressed into a line. The boy gulped, and he tilted his head to look at Hopper past his eyebrows.

"What happened?" he asked again, his voice losing the tremble from before. Hopper's mouth went dry.

"Richie, we need to leave—."

"What happened? Tell me now."

"Fuck—kid get away—."

"WHAT HAPPENED," Richie yelled, and Hopper felt the fear and anger in the boy, watching his hands clench at his sides, shaking. And just as suddenly as Richie's anger saturated the air, the boy's face warped into shock. He twisted around in a circle, his eyes once again wide, this time searching. Hopper watched his mouth open and close before he started to mumble. Then, he began to yell.

"ELEVEN WHERE ARE YOU," he screamed. His face was scared, his mouth a grimace and his eyebrows twisted in worry. "Please, Eleven. I feel you here—let me help you. Please WHERE ARE YOU." Hopper watched the boy's eyes search the room, never settling on a spot for long. Richie looked frustrated, like he should be able to pinpoint a location. Like his senses were overwhelmed. "LET ME HELP YOU."

"Eleven," Hopper said, interrupting Richie. The boy whipped his head at the officer as he continued, "You need to rest. You can't keep searching like this—you'll wear yourself out." Hopper gave a small reassuring smile to wherever Eleven was watching from. "I found the brat, so don't worry. I'll bring him home safe and then we are watching Dukes of Hazard tonight." Hopper looked back at Richie, seeing this boy's eyes wide and his stance stiff. Hopper sniffed, sighing.

“Kid, I’m not explaining anything in this god damned place.”

Richie stared at him, taking huffed breaths.

“Christ kid, let’s just get out of here.”

He only stared more, his stance still like he was prepared to run away if given the chance.

“Let me take you back to your aunt. She’s probably going crazy right now.”

Richie’s wide eyes faltered, relaxing slightly as Richie took a deep inhale and exhale.

He took a step forward.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- Hang onto Yourself

Hoooo man this was a fun chapter to write. I love when I get the chance to write abstract things like Richie feeling the remnants of the gate in the lab

WHAT DID YOU THINK? I am also stoked for the next chapter. I have been waiting to write whats going to happen next for a while, too. It won't be exactly what you expect, but I am super stoked to write it.

28. Chapter Twenty-Eight: Though reaching up my loneliness evolves

Notes for the Chapter:

I return again soon cause I have been wanting to write this part since two friggin years ago.

enjoy some drama :)

The further they walked away from the building, the more Richie started to feel like himself and not like the fear and crying of the hundreds of souls stranded there. The officer kept a firm grip on his arm until they stepped out of the building, only letting go when they saw the sky outside. Darkness had settled on the landscape, so Richie kept close to the officer as he adjusted his flashlight and guided them back to his car. Richie took in deep, settling breaths as the sticky, thick feeling of the air started to thin. He tried not to limp with his injured leg, side eyeing the officer to see if he noticed. The man kept his eyes forward, focused on reaching the car that was parked by the opening in the gate. "Christ, there was a fucking gate," Richie mumbled, and the officer grunted in response. His knee taunted him, giving a throb when he lifted his leg to step into the vehicle.

When the officer started the car, Richie sunk into the seat, shutting his eyes and rubbing his face under his glasses. The officer sniffed once before backing up and driving them down the road. Richie pursed his lips.

"So where is Eleven, Officer Stalker?" he asked, glaring at the officer. The man ignored him for a moment, searching in his pants pocket until he whipped out a pack of Camels. Richie's fingers twitched. The officer lit one and took a long drag.

"Hopper." Richie raised an eyebrow. "Name's Jim Hopper. And Eleven," he took another drag, "is at home." Hopper looked like he was done talking.

"Oh wow, that answers all of my questions. Thank you so much for clearing all that up," Richie said, his voice monotone. Hopper's

mustache twitched. Rolling down his window, Hopper flicked his cigarette butt outside.

“Kid, right now your aunt is probably about to call the police because you ran off. Alright? I’ll answer your questions, but you need to get back to the Wheelers.”

Richie groaned and pushed his head back into the headrest.

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Nancy squeezed the steering wheel tightly, peering at any sign of a person with her headlights. “Shit,” she whispered to herself, worriedly tapping her fingers and brushing her bangs back. He could be anywhere. How long was too long to call the police? Would they have to report it as a stolen vehicle? Would Richie get arrested if they reported it? “Fucking shit,” she said, smacking the steering twice when she saw yet another trash can on the side of the road instead of her cousin. Sighing, Nancy shook her head, and turned down to get to Jonathan’s house. They had been getting along well enough, maybe Richie had gone to hang out with him. Or maybe Jonathan would join her in the search. She pressed on the accelerator. The street didn’t have any lights other than her headlights, and Nancy tried to see anything on the side of the road. Ahead, there was a pulled over car sitting, and Nancy slammed on her breaks, coming to a screeching halt. There on the side of the road was her mother’s Volkswagen.

She pulled to the side and rushed to the car, peering in the windows. Empty. She swore, turning around to see if anyone was nearby. Her hands went clammy as she stood in the darkness, her headlights casting chaotic shadows around the trees. These woods were where Will went missing. Where she crawled her way into the Upside Down. Nancy’s spine gave a shiver and she crossed her arms, turning around once again. In the distance, two pinprick headlights appeared, and Nancy backed up toward her car as she waited for them to pass. They slowed down and pulled up to her. Nancy let her arms rest at her sides as she noticed the familiar make and model of the car.

“Hopper,” she said as he rolled down his window. There in the passenger seat sat Richie, his skin pale and his clothes looking

muddy. Nancy started toward the car. “You found him.”

Hopper parked his car, and Richie gingerly stepped out. Clenching her hands, Nancy rushed toward him, intent on scolding, until she saw his face. Dark circles were under his eyes, barely hidden by his rimmed glasses, and he was bleeding badly from his right knee. “Shit, Richie—what the fuck did you do?” He shrugged, no comment coming from his mouth. Nancy furrowed her brow. “Mom is going crazy.”

Richie, shoved his hand in his pocket, looking at the ground. “Auntie Karen is wiggin’—Jesus, what else is new.” He walked passed Nancy, heading for the car, and Nancy felt her hands start to shake in anger. She took a step toward him when Hopper pulled her back with a hand on her shoulder.

“Did you know he’s been talking to Eleven?” he asked. Nancy eyes went wide.

“What?” she responded, and Hopper huffed, rubbing his mustache and reaching for a cigarette. He let the cigarette hang out of the corner of his mouth as he continued.

“She’s been visiting him,” he poked his temple, “in her head.” He took his cigarette out, keeping it between his pointer and middle finger. “He can sense her.”

“You’re kidding me,” Nancy said, her eyes wide. Hopper shook his head.

“He rushed off here because he thought she was lost like Will. He wanted to find her.” When his smoke burnt down to the filter, he dropped it and stamped it out under his boot. “Never talked to you about it, did he?”

“He sensed her? Like,” she paused, squeezing her eyes shut, “Hopper, he’s not from the lab. He can’t do anything that Eleven can do.” Hopper stared at her and opened his mouth to speak, but was shocked at a bright light shining behind them. Both Nancy and Hopper whipped their heads to see Richie had turned on the Volkswagen and was turning to leave them behind. He gave them a

sarcastic wave as he pulled onto the road. “Shit,” Nancy said before she ran back to her dad’s BMW and went drove off to follow him, leaving Hopper behind.

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Karen stood straight when she saw the familiar headlights pull into the driveway. The curtain she had been nervously fiddling with left her hands, its seams wrinkled and bent. The car door slammed, and she saw as her nephew walk back up to the house. His hands were shoved in his pockets, his hair hanging in front of his face. He was walking up like he was just coming home from school. Like he didn’t just scare her half to death. Karen set her jaw. When she felt the tumblers turn and the door start to swing open, she rushed to Richie, her lip stiff and her hands clenched.

“Where the hell have you been,” she all but yelled, doing her best to remain calm. Richie toed off his shoes at the door, casually hanging the keys back up on their hook.

“I’m back, so all is good,” he responded. Karen shook.

“You had me worried half to death—I was about to call the police,” she said, stomping up to him. Richie’s eyes darted around the room. “I was sitting here, going through every possible, horrible reason of what could happen—you could have been dead and crashed in a ditch, or trying to run away—and you think you can just tell me “I’m back”?” She stepped closer again, ignoring the sound of the basement door opening and her son and his friends peering up the steps to watch. He finally turned to look at her face, and Karen saw how pale he was. How disheveled his clothes were. And for all her anger, she still felt that twinge of concern. “What is going on, Richie?” Richie took a breath and shook his head.

“Nothing is going on, alright? I just,” he walked passed her, “I just needed some air.”

“Oh no,” Karen said, her words coming out in almost a laugh. “That is not good enough. That is not nearly good enough.”

“Well, fuck, Auntie. I don’t know what you want from me,” he raised

his hands to his forehead, rubbing it.

“I want you to talk to me, Richie. I was so worried—I’m still worried. What is going on?” He whipped his hand away from his face, looking up at his aunt, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Don’t worry about me—I’m fine. I’m not here living in your house so that you can turn me into another Nancy or a fucking Mike. I’m here to get through high school and then get the fuck out.” Karen stiffened her lip as Richie took a step closer to her. “Don’t push me, don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

“Richie, as much as you may not like it, you are a part of this family, and I will worry about you all I want.” Karen stepped forward again, and he groaned and shook his head, running his hand through his unruly hair. The phone on the corner nook started to ring, but she ignored the sound, focusing on the boy in front of her. “And no one is pushing you—YOU are the one who is pushing everyone away.”

“Well FUCK Auntie, maybe it’s because I don’t need you? I’m fine by myself,” he answered. “So stop pretending to care.” Behind Karen, she barely registered the sound of the door opening and Nancy slipping inside. The phone continued to ring as Karen inched forward again, trying to bridge the gap between her and Richie. He noticed and took a defensive step backwards.

“You think I’m pretending to care?” she said, her voice breathy and hurt.

“Christ, you and every other adult. Checking off your “do a good deed” box by helping out the poor little bruised kid to make yourself feel better. I’ve been in foster homes before—I’ve been to the fucking school psychologists and the teachers and it’s all the fucking same. You pat yourself on the back or collect your fucking check and go. So don’t pretend that you give two shits about me. I don’t need it.” Richie took a breath, waiting for Karen to respond. She stepped forward again.

“Richie—I’m trying to help,” she said. He huffed as the phone let out another ring around the room.

“Don’t—I’m fine. I don’t need help. I can take care of myself. I don’t need anyone worrying about me and forcing yourself to give a shit and will ONE OF YOU FUCKING EVESDROPPERS PICK UP THE PHONE?” Richie whipped his head to the kitchen where Max, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin all stood stiff. Eyes darting between each other, they silently pushed Dustin to the phone. He turned back at them, his eyes wide, before continuing to the phone. Both Karen and Richie’s voices hushed as he answered.

“Richie, please, I just—.”

“Auntie, I don’t need you or anyone to help me. I have my friends and that’s all I need.” Richie shifted on his legs, wincing at the pain in his knee. Karen noticed the wince, and she trailed her eyes down his body until she saw the gash in his leg, his pants bloodied and stained. She was about to ask what happened when Dustin interrupted.

“Um, so the phone is for Richie,” he said, looking around the room, avoiding anyone’s eyes. Both Karen and Richie looked at him, their eyes furrowed. Karen spoke first.

“Your friend Stanley had called while you were gone,” she said, and Richie’s pale face seemed to gain a shade of color at the sound of his friend. “Dustin, tell him Richie will call him tomorrow.” Richie shook his head.

“Fuck that,” he said, and despite Karen’s scolding he snatched the phone out of Dustin’s hand and put it to his ear. “Hey,” he answered casually as Dustin inched away and back to the others. Karen shook her head, grumbling under her breath, watching Richie stand stiff with the phone still up to his ear. “Hey,” he said again, only his voice had gone soft. Soothing. Karen’s brows furrowed.

Richie leaned his hand on the counter, his head lolling downward. “It’s—it’s good. Things are good,” he said, and Karen turned to look at Nancy, who was staring at Richie with concern, her arms crossed and her lips pursed. Karen turned to look back at Richie and figure out his body language. His slumped shoulders. His shifting feet. His fingers that reached up to fiddle with the phone cord or reached down to play with the pens in the pencil mug. “Don’t worry, I’m

fine,” he said, his head lolling further. Like he was shrinking into himself. Making himself smaller. And Karen’s eyes widened when she realized he wasn’t talking to his friend.

“Hey—hey mom, I’m fine. It’s okay. I need you to do something for me, alright? Let me help you.” Karen’s whole body went cold, her hands itching to take the phone away or to smooth his hunched shoulders. “Mom, I need you to go to the cabinet above the sink and pour yourself a glass of water, alright? Don’t hang up the phone, just put it down.” He was silent for almost a minute as the group all stood, watching him shift and tug on the cord. “Good job, ok Mom and I need you to reach into the side table drawer. There’s that old mint tin in there. I filled it up with aspirin.” Karen shut her eyes, listening as Richie continued, “Just put it right by the water. You did it? Good job.” He rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses as he said, “Now, just sleep it off on the couch, alright? Don’t go upstairs—I don’t want you to fall down again.” Richie nodded to himself twice before he took a slow breath and said, “Love you, too. Good night,” and hung up the phone with a resounding click. The room was silent, barely a breath escaping anyone’s body.

He stood still for ten seconds before grabbing the pencil mug and throwing it at the wall. It crashed against a family portrait.

Everyone jumped back when the glass fell to the floor, shattering around them. Mike’s eyes went wide and Dustin held his arm out in front of his friends, pushing them back a step. Richie stood still, his breath ragged, before he noticed what he had done. “Shit,” Richie shouted, and then crouched on the ground, his hands shaking as he reached to collect the bigger pieces of the mug. Karen watched him struggle to keep the shards of porcelain from breaking his skin, and she took a careful step forward until she could crouch right next to him. His hair covered his face as he focused on his task. Karen spoke.

“You’ve been taking care of so many people. Your mother. Your friends. Yourself.” Karen almost whispered to him, her voice surprisingly steady and unwavering. “You’ve been helping everyone else and not letting anyone worry about you. Keeping people just far enough so that you can be there for them, but that they don’t have to be there for you.” Richie halted in picking up a piece of glass, his fingers resting on the ground just next to it. Karen leaned closer,

placing a hand on his back.

“That must have been very lonely,” she said.

And something in Richie, something pushed deep down inside of him, snapped and tears overflowed down his face, dropping onto the floor in front of him. Sobs started to force their way from his lungs. He dropped the shards of glass and porcelain as another sob pushed out of him, and Karen tugged on his shirt, bringing him to her, and he brought his arms around her and clung. Like a lost child.

“Everything is so fucked up,” he said into her shoulder, and Karen brought up her hand up to his head, her fingers combing through his curls.

“It is,” she said, and his body gave another shudder. He held on tighter. “But you don’t have to feel like that all by yourself. You don’t have to pretend that everything is fine so that no one worries.” Karen closed her eyes. “You don’t have to be strong for everyone. Let us be strong for you. Just once.”

And as they rocked on the floor, as Nancy led the kids out of the room, as Mike took one long glance at the broken boy, Karen smoothed his back with her hand. She curled her fingers in his hair. She gave the side of his head a firm, forceful kiss. And she held him like a mother.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- Soul Love

I am not very nice to Richie, am I?

It will probably be a little longer until the next update. I had been wanting to write all of this for such a long time, and now that I've gotten to it, I'll probably end up taking a bit of break to better plan out the rest of what I'll do. I had up to this point planned out for so long...

thank you all for reading!

29. Chapter Twenty-Nine: Sometimes wishing, sometimes

Notes for the Chapter:

This is more a transition chapter to what's going to happen next. Not a whooole lot happens, but I thought this was necessary after the intensity of the last chapter to have something a little more calm before heading right back into the crazy. I hope you all enjoy this lil chapter < 3

Nancy handed her homeroom teacher the doctor's note. "My cousin won't be in today," she said, and her teacher took the note from her with a gruff "alright" before waving her to sit down in her seat. Nancy flattened her skirt before sitting, and she tucked her hair behind her ears. Looking to her right, she studied the empty seat that had become Richie's desk. It sat lonely in the group, and Nancy shifted in her seat as she remembered the crumpled figure of him sunk into her mother the night before. Nancy pursed her lips, looking back at the black board. There was a tap on her shoulder, and Nancy turned around to see Donna Mae leaning close to her.

"Where is Richie?" she asked. Her blonde hair was neatly blow-dried away from her face, and she wore the lowest cut shirt she could manage without being called out by a teacher.

"He had a doctor's appointment, and my mom wasn't sure how long it would last, so she got the whole day off for him," Nancy answered, hoping her half-truth would be sufficient. Donna Mae huffed, puffing out her cheeks.

"Well, shit—got all dressed up for nothing." She crossed her arms, a small line of cleavage from her breasts pressing together. Nancy did her best not to look at it. Instead, she shrugged her shoulders and turned back to look forward. Donna Mae continued. "Just—when he came into school yesterday with those new glasses," she sighed. "He pulls it off, y'know? Like, glasses usually make people look like total geeks, but Richie just looks," Donna Mae placed her chin in her hand,

“like an even more handsome Buddy Holly.” Nancy snorted in her hand.

“Nancy,” Donna Mae tapped her shoulder again. “You think you could set us up?” Nancy turned back to her again, this time with an upturned eyebrow. Donna Mae was leaning towards her, her hands clasped together in a dramatic beg. “Please, I think he might be into me, but can you just hint at it to him?” Sighing, Nancy shrugged, nodding at Donna Mae before their teacher interrupted them to start taking attendance.

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Karen took him to the doctor’s that morning to look at his knee. It had eventually stopped bleeding, but she didn’t like his lack of answer to how he had gotten the injury in the first place. He was too drained to continue speaking that night anyway, so she called the doctor and was able to squeeze in an appointment early the next morning. Karen sat silent in the doctor’s office with Holly on her lap as he spoke with Richie, asking about his medical history and how school was going. Richie answered with jokes and what Karen now recognized as him dodging questions. The doctor didn’t seem to notice.

“Now, let’s take a look at that scrape to appease your aunt, alright?” the doctor continued. Karen sniffed and Richie gave a stiff smile before lifting up the medical gown. The wound had scabbed over, but looked like it could split easily back open. It was ugly, red, and irritated. The doctor’s face scrunched just slightly before examining the wound. “And Richard, how did you manage to do this?”

Richie huffed out a laugh. “I got into a fight with some barbed wire.” Karen’s eyes widened a fraction as Richie’s eyes darted to hers for a second before focusing back on the doctor. The man chuckled.

“Well, it doesn’t need any stitches, but be sure to put some topical antiseptics on it.”

“Right-o there doc,” Richie answered.

“And we’ll give you a tetanus shot as a precaution.”

When they got back to the car, Karen sat in silence, both hands on the steering wheel and the key sitting in the ignition. Richie was also quiet, his hands flexing on his legs and picking at the hole in his jeans. He looked away from her, staring out the window. Karen spoke first.

“Did you really hurt your leg on barbed wire?”

Richie nodded out the window.

Karen pursed her lips and started the car.

When they left the parking lot, Karen drove them toward the grocery store. Richie turned on the radio, switching it between different stations before settling on a song Karen didn't recognize. Richie put both feet on the dashboard, tapping his hands against his knees to the beat as they drove down familiar streets and turns. She eyed Richie without turning her head from the road, and decided to ask him a different question.

“When you were back in Maine, did you ever run out like you did last night?” Richie stiffened, his hands no longer tapping to the music. Only Holly's quiet humming filled the car, and Karen watched from the corner of her eye as Richie sighed and rubbed his hand through his hair.

“Once I stayed for two days on my friend Bill's couch.” Karen nodded, staying silent and waiting for him to continue. When he didn't elaborate, Karen pushed.

“What did you do after? Did your parents find you?” Richie shrugged, turning his head slightly so he could see Karen. His face was a grimace hiding behind a weak smile.

“I just went home when I realized no one was looking for me,” he said. His voice started strong, but trailed into a whisper, weak and breaking. He whipped his head back to the window and Karen clenched her hands on the steering wheel. They took a left turn that led them to the local grocery store, and Karen parked the car with a quick turn of the steering wheel. With the car parked and the keys in her hand, she sat back on her seat, pressing her head to the cushion

for a moment before turning to look at Richie. He still sat with his feet up on the dashboard, his hair covering his face.

“Richie. I want to tell you something.” She watched him clench his jaw and turn his face so she could see him. His eyes still looked slightly puffy, his glasses doing a good job of masking them from view. “You were gone for two hours yesterday.” Richie nodded. “How long do you think I took before sending Nancy out to get you?” Eyes darting to the window again, Richie shrugged. Then, he forced a shallow laugh from his mouth.

“Probably a whole thirty seconds.”

“Wrong,” Karen answered. “It was less.” Richie nodded again, pursing his lips and flattened his fists on his legs, rubbing his large hands against his jeans. “I just want to promise you. I will worry. And I will look for you. Even if you’re missing for only a minute.” Richie’s eyes connected with hers, and he took a deep breath in through his nose before nodding again.

“Don’t leave again, Richie—we need to play when we get home,” Holly said in the back, and Richie looked at her in her booster seat, and a grin broke out on his face. The girl returned the smile, and Richie reached over to tug at one of her pigtails.

“Now, Holly-wolly, how could I ever forget to play with you?” Holly batted his hand away with a cry, her face wide and grinning. Karen watched them pick on each other for a moment, letting a gentle smile upturn the corners of her mouth before stepping out of the car.

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With the groceries put away, the house fell silent. Holly decided she wanted to watch TV before Karen put her down for a nap, even if she barely napped anymore. Richie pretended to be offended, and dramatically threw his hands over his heart. Holly laughed and ran from the room. Karen asked if Richie wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich like she was making for Holly, and Richie then went into a rant about the superiority of fluffernutter to PB and J. Karen thought better than to ask him what fluffernutter was in the first place. Richie snatched the plate she made for him and trotted up to

his bedroom.

Flopping back on the bed, Richie gave a groan, covering his face with his hands and rubbing his eyes under his glasses. Staring up at the ceiling, he traced the lines of the popcorn design, watching how the light dipped into the divots. He reached into his drawer to find his envelope full of photos and he flipped through the pictures. One had Richie's head cut off as he attempted to get a surprise shot of Stan and him. Stan had a toothbrush hanging from his mouth and a well-timed middle finger for the camera. The next had Ben and Mike hunched over a nameless textbook, next Eddie's back, his hands on his hips and his shirt riding up just a little bit. Richie stared at it for a moment longer before moving on to the next. Bill giving Beverly a piggy back ride with Eddie worried in the background. Mike looking stoically off to the right. Ben and Bill with Chee-tos up their noses. Eddie laying on a towel at the beach. Richie and Eddie's hands held together. Bev failing a cartwheel. When Richie came to the group photo of the Losers when he was leaving, he held it up to the sun. Studied the faces. And he held the picture close as he finished his sandwich and laid back, falling into a light sleep.

Shaking hands pushed him awake. Richie startled, his eyes flying open. He turned to see Nancy seated by his bed. "Get up," she said, shoving him again. Richie furrowed his brow.

"Uh, the fuck Nance." He gestured to himself, "I was in a blissful sleep." Nancy huffed at him, tugging his arm again. "Jesus, where's the fire—what do you need?" She crossed her arms, giving him a look that reminded him of Karen.

"Just get up—we need to go," she answered, lifting a leg to shove him with her foot. Richie laughed, turning to sit cross-legged on the bed.

"And where are we going, oh mysterious Nancy Drew?" Nancy raised an eyebrow as he continued, "Are we going to look for that hidden staircase? I hear there's an old clock somewhere just chock full of secrets." She squinted at him.

"You've read Nancy Drew?" Richie shrugged.

“My friend Bill really likes mystery.”

Nancy sighed, shaking her head for a moment. She then stepped backwards to check the hallway. Empty. She held her arms tighter, stepping back to Richie, her face determined and set. Richie's shoulders stiffened as she leaned down to him, and whispered.

“I'm taking you to meet Eleven.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- Right

DO NOT INTERACT UNLESS YOU KNOW WHAT FLUFFERNUTTER IS (jk). One of the many reasons I loved Stephen King growing up is because I understood all of his New England references. That's my homeland peeps.

Ooooooh so Nancy is taking him to our guuurl. They finally gonna meet. Yall excited cause I am

also i loved Nancy Drew growing up so much. I think I still have the first 20 books somewhere in my basement

30. Chapter Thirty: Staying back in your memory

Notes for the Chapter:

hello again all <3

So i noticed like two seconds ago that this story has over 1k kudos on it like yall are way too nice

I'm not hugely happy on how this chapter came out, but I'm looking forward to the stuff that is gonna happen next. I hope you guys like it

Richie sat straight, staring at Nancy, his eyes wide. She looked back, her steady gaze challenging.

“What?” he said, and Nancy shushed him before grabbing his arm to tug him to stand. “Jesus—give me a second—you know Eleven?” He shoved the picture of his friends in his back pocket as Nancy dragged him from the room, only letting go of his arm when they made it to the stairs. She trotted down the steps, turning toward the kitchen.

“Mom, Richie and I are going to hang out with Jonathan,” she called, and Karen peaked her head out from the kitchen. She stopped drying the dishes, the cloth in her hand hanging loosely as she and Nancy shared a nod before Karen answered.

“Are you feeling okay, Richie?” Karen asked, rubbing her dish lightly. Richie forced a light smile on his face. He nodded at her, and Karen gave him a warm smile back. “Have fun with Jonathan.”

Nancy answered, “We’ll be back for dinner,” and pushed Richie’s stiff figure to the door.

“And tell Joyce I said hello.”

“I will,” Nancy said, and she closed the front door behind her. Richie stood still as Nancy rushed past him, unlocking her mother’s Volkswagen before sliding into the driver’s seat. “Get in,” she said to Richie’s still figure, and he hurried to her.

“Nancy what the fuck—.”

“Just get in.” Nancy turned the ignition, starting the car.

“Fucking Christ,” Richie huffed before getting in the passenger side. Nancy backed out of their driveway as Richie strapped on his seatbelt, and then they were on the road, Nancy still silent and Richie’s eyes darting from her to the road. She kept clenching and unclenching her hands on the steering wheel, her brow furrowed and focused. Richie’s own hands were dragging against his jeans, playing with the worn seams of his pants. Shaking his head, Richie turned to stare at Nancy.

“What the fuck is going on,” Richie said, his voice demanding and firm. Nancy kept her eyes on the road.

“What do you think—you’re going to meet Eleven?”

“Yeah, I figured out that. How the fuck do you know her?”

Nancy angled her chin high. “What about you, huh?” Her eyes darted to meet his for a moment before whipping back to the road. “Were you ever going to tell us that you were talking to her?”

Richie raised his hands, “I didn’t know you knew—fuck, Nancy this is so fucking stupid. Where are we going?”

Nancy paused. “Hopper’s.”

Richie squinted at her. She kept her eyes on the road. “The fat ass cop?”

A nervous laugh forced itself from Nancy’s lips. “Yeah, the fat ass cop.”

“He said he was going to explain everything to me, but you fucking know shit. Tell me.”

“No,” Nancy said.

“Christ—what is wrong with this place, Nancy? Why is there a fucking mass grave in the middle of the woods?” Nancy pursed her lips, tightening her grip on the steering wheel as they took a turn. “Who the hell is Eleven?”

“She’s Hopper’s daughter. He adopted her.”

Richie furrowed his eyebrows, shaking his head at Nancy. “Well fuck—now that answers all of my fucking questions. Jesus Nancy, you really are a fucking beacon of knowledge. She’s the fat ass cop’s daughter! Now I can take my ass back home and sleep like a—.”

“OH MY GOD RICHIE SHUT THE FUCK UP,” Nancy yelled, slamming on the break at a stop sign. She yanked the clutch into park and whipped her head to Richie. “Listen, she’s,” Nancy paused, eyes darting around the vehicle. She craned her neck to look behind them out the rear window. Richie followed her gaze, and saw nothing but a few pedestrians and parked cars. Nancy huffed out a breath before reaching into the glove compartment for a napkin and a pen. Richie watched her scribble against the window, and when she was done she capped the pen, chucked it behind her, and held the napkin in front of Richie’s face.

I DON’T KNOW WHO IS LISTENING. SHUT UP. HOP WILL EXPLAIN.

Richie pushed up his glasses and took the note from her hand. He watched as Nancy put the car back into drive and pressed gently on the gas. Richie let the napkin sit in his lap as he watched Nancy bite at her bottom lip, her fingers drumming against the steering wheel as she took turn after turn until they were heading towards the woods. For a moment, Richie focused on the feelings surrounding him. They weren’t near the woods from before, so there was no fog of terror tracing his spine. There wasn’t a tingle of someone watching out of sight. Nothing that hinted of another’s presence. Searching, Richie scanned the car for signs of tampering. Listening devices. Hidden cameras. Richie gave Nancy another look from the side before taking her note and ripping it, folding the pieces, and ripping it again. Nancy kept her eyes on the road but nodded, and Richie sniffed.

They reached a small dirt road and Nancy took the turn off into the woods, parking near a fallen tree. Richie stumbled out of the car as Nancy walked out, heading deeper into the woods. Shadows from the full branches above darkened their path, but Nancy stepped forward confidently. Like she’d walked through these woods before. Richie followed.

As they moved further into the woods, Richie felt his eyes darting past tree trunks and ferns. There still was no feeling like the woods before, but the memory of the people left behind there pricked up his skin. He was waiting to step right back into the thick feeling. The feeling of damp, seeping cold. But further they went until a cabin peered through the trees. It was not horrible unkempt. The roof was obviously old, moss painting the old asphalt shingles. There was a deck that was beginning to rot, the few steps looking sunken, but the deck was also newly swept. The place was unwelcoming and yet obviously lived in. Nancy trotted up the steps, leaving Richie at the bottom for a moment to attempt to peer through the windows but the blinds were drawn tight. She did a patterned knock and stepped back.

After a silent moment, the clicks of multiple unlocking tumblers started and ended, and Hopper opened the door. He leaned on the doorway, nodding at Nancy before rubbing his mustache. "You followed?"

Nancy rolled her eyes, "Obviously not." She crossed her arms, raising her eyebrows at Hopper. He sighed and rolled his eyes back at her. Richie shifted between his feet behind her, and Hopper waved them both inside.

They were greeted by an almost comfortable scene. There were several lamps around the room to compensate for the drawn blinds. Mismatched couches were positioned around a small television set, and a small fold up table still held a messy plate from lunch. Behind the couches were a few doors and some taped up doodles that looked similar to the drawings he'd seen at the Byer's house. Richie shoved his hands in his front pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"So this is a really beautiful murder cabin," he said. Nancy huffed and Hopper ignored him. Walking to a rickety side table, Hopper took a sip from a can of beer, and Richie forcefully kept his eyes away from the motion. Hopper spoke.

"Kid, first things first," he paused, setting the can back on the table, "Everything you see in in this cabin? Stays in this cabin, yeah?" He took a step toward Richie, who forced his feet to stay firm. Hopper stared him down his nose, and Richie sniffed.

“So, no lifting anything—got it,” Richie said, and Hopper took a steadying breath as Richie let a light snicker slip between his teeth. Richie then nodded at Hopper, “I’m not telling anyone. Relax.” Hopper gave him one last forceful stare before turning back to Nancy who still stood with her arms crossed. He let out a huff before turning to one of the doors and knocking it.

“Elle, the kid is here,” he said, nervously rubbing his hair back with his hand. The doorknob turned quickly, and the door swung wide. And Richie stood still as he watched a young girl step out from the room. Her baggy shirt was tucked into her jeans, her hair was bushy and curly, and her face was determined. And she looked like a normal kid.

But Richie recognized her presence immediately. It was familiar, the steps she took toward him. The trained, silent breaths she inhaled and exhaled. When she stepped closer to him, he felt his legs move forward too, edging closer to that familiar feeling. And when she spoke, it was the same strong voice that translated into the air of his room, communicating with him through miles of space.

“Richie,” she said, her mouth resting open, her teeth peeking through her lips.

“Eleven,” he said back, and she nodded at him, her brow furrowed and her eyes darting between his. Richie pursed his lips. “I guess you meant this cabin when you said you lived in the woods.” She nodded again. “Good, you didn’t live in that other fucking place.” Eleven pressed her lips together.

“I did,” she paused, “live there.” Richie’s skin cooled suddenly, his hands feeling stiff.

“Did you live there when all those people died?” Richie asked, his sentence trailing quiet. He stepped closer to her, and barely registered Hopper inching closer as well. Nancy moved too, shifting and rubbing her arms. Eleven shook her head no. “What happened, Eleven?” Eleven looked back at him, pursing her lips before looking back at Hopper. They both shared a look, silently communicating, but Richie was losing patience. He huffed, clenching his fists.

“You said you’d explain everything.” He stepped towards Hopper, “What happened in that building? Why is there a fucking shiner hiding out in the woods—what the fuck is wrong with this fucking shithole town?” Hopper crossed his arms for a moment before shaking his head.

“Kid, show me your wrist.”

Confused, Richie shuffled back, his face grimaced. “The fuck—.”

“Like this,” Eleven said, and she raised her sleeve on her left arm to reveal a small tattoo. It was faded, old. Marked with three digits. 011. Richie’s eyes widened. He whipped his head back to Hopper, and the man nodded at him to get on with it. Still staring at Hopper, Richie raised the sleeve on his shirt. No marks. A few old scars from childhood injuries. But no tattoo.

“What the fuck is going on,” Richie asked, but Hopper interrupted.

“You’ve got to answer a couple of our questions first, kid.” Hopper sat back on the side table as Eleven tugged her sleeve back down. “First—are you from a lab?”

Richie furrowed his brow, an incredulous expression distorting his features. “What, like a fucking science experiment or something? Yeah, I’m a fucking test tube clone here to steal your skin.” The answering silence startled him, and looked at Hopper, then Eleven, then Nancy, before continuing, “No. I’m not from a lab. I was born in fucking Portland.”

Hopper nodded, “You ever heard of a guy named Dr. Martin Brenner?” Richie shook his head no. “Or Dr. Sam Owens?” Again, Richie shook his head. Hopper opened his mouth to speak again when Nancy interrupted him.

“What is a ‘shiner’?” she asked. Shifting between her feet, Nancy continued, “A second ago you said ‘why is there a shiner in the woods.’ What’s a ‘shiner’?” The eyes turned back on Richie, and he forced a shallow swallow before casually shrugging.

“That’s just why my friends all call people like us.”

“People like you?” Nancy said.

Richie nodded, “Yeah, people who can sense shit.” He turned to look at Eleven. “People like us.”

Hopper spoke, “You mean to tell me,” he paused, “Your friends can do the same thing you can?” Again Richie nodded. “And none of you are from a lab?”

Richie raised his hands, “No, we’re all normal ass losers—born in fucking hospitals. Well, Mike was actually born in the back of his old man’s truck, but that—.”

“You can do that stuff naturally?” Nancy asked, stepping forward.

“Pretty much.” Eleven and Hopper’s eyes connected again, and Richie watched them, his eyes shifting between the two. Then his eyes widened. “Wait, Eleven. Are you,” he paused, and she looked back at him, her face hardened. “You’re from a fucking lab?”

Eleven nodded.

“Jesus Christ.”

Hopper shifted from where he was sitting, standing and moving to one of the couches. “Nancy, grab me another beer. Kid, sit down.” He waved Richie to sit on the couch across from the one he was on, and Richie slowly meandered over, his face still whipping back to look at Eleven. She stood still, leaning back against the wall. Richie sat back on the striped sofa, and Nancy handed Hopper another beer. He cracked it open, taking a quick sip and placing it next to his empty can. “Remember, nothing leaves this cabin.” Richie leaned forward, nodding. Hopper rubbed his face, taking a deep breath, and started to tell him about November of ’83.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song-- The Prettiest Star

there were like a million questions asked in this chapter and a bunch of f words whoops.

As you can likely see, this chapter is crappy. but I'm looking forward to writing what happens next, so i'm probably gonna start writing like wicked soon. so hopefully you wont have to wait too long.

31. Chapter Thirty-One: A mortal with the potential of a superman

Notes for the Chapter:

I return again.

I ended up not quite getting to the stuff i wanted to in this one, but that's fine. I like to leave you guys in suspense cause i am evil.

ALSO AGAIN UNBETAD. I didn't even read it over once oops I'll read it over tomorrow or something.

When Mike returned from school, he went into the house through the basement door. Silence greeted him, and he tossed his backpack onto his pullout bed, toed off his shoes, and headed up the stairs to the kitchen. There, he could only hear the low volume of Mr. Rogers from the living room. Mike tapped lightly on the kitchen counter before going into the living room to see Holly slouched on the couch, her feet dangling off the edge, kicking back and forth lightly. She was sucking on a lock of her hair, a habit that Karen had been trying to stop. Mike walked over and tugged the hair out of her mouth.

"Holly, where is mom?" he asked, and the girl kept her eyes on the TV, shrugging in response. Mike sighed, flopping back on the couch with her. He crossed his arms, watching Lady Elaine singing a song to a woman character that Richie couldn't remember the name of. Holly's feet were twisting from side to side to the music, and Mike pushed himself further back into the cushion. Mike let his eyes shut for a moment, listening to the childish music for a moment when a light tap on his knee forced him to open his eyes again.

"Can I have some apple juice?" Holly said, and Mike sighed again, before nodding, standing to go into the kitchen. Once there, he whipped open the fridge, snatched the juice, and quickly poured it into the first sippy-cup he could find. Snapping on the cover, Mike walked back towards the living room when he passed the missing space on the wall. He paused, staring at the empty spot, remembering the photo that was there. It was an older Christmas card shot that his parents had made them take. Mike remembered the stiff,

uncomfortable shirt Karen had forced him in, and how hot it was under the lights. Nancy had been complaining too, saying her dress was starched too much and that her bobby pins were hurting her head. Holly was the one who was fussing the least, perfectly content in Karen's arms. In the end, they had managed to get a nice picture of the whole family. And it crashed into a million pieces because of a boy who had nothing.

"Why did Richie break the picture, Mike?" Holly asked. Mike turned to see her moved on the couch, draping herself over the arm so she could see down the hall. Mike clenched the sippy-cup tight as he stepped toward her.

"He didn't mean to," he said, shoving the sippy-cup into her hands. She frowned.

"These cups are for babies."

"Yup, and you're a baby."

"I'm not a baby—I'm five," she said, pouting. She attempted to take the cover off, but Mike swiped it away from her.

"Last time you didn't have a cover, you spilled all over Dad." She pouted again, sticking out her lip, but Mike shoved the drink back in her hands, watching her until she took a sip from the spout. She flopped back onto the couch, looking at the television again. Taking a long sip of her juice, Holly held the cup close, focusing on the screen. Mike crossed his arms again, looking back at the TV.

"You hate Richie," Holly said, and Mike eyed her.

"I don't hate him."

"Yes you do," she responded.

"Do not."

"Do, too."

"Do not."

“Do, too.” She took a slow sip, looking up at Mike and daring him to continue. He huffed.

“I don’t hate him—I just don’t like him very much.”

“Why?” Holly asked, taking another sip. Mike shrugged.

“He makes annoying jokes, and he took my room, and he picks on me.” Mike looked back at Holly, but she was still focusing on the show, her feet dangling again. Mike flopped his head on the back of the couch. “He is just. He’s very different. He’s nothing like us.” Mike shrugged to himself, looking away from the television out the window. The curtains swayed lightly at the breeze through the open window, and he heard a neighbor walking past.

“You don’t have to be exactly like somebody to be able to love them,” Holly said, and Mike whipped his head back to look at her. She was still focused on the show, taking another sip from her cup and then placing it back in her lap.

“Where did you hear that?” he asked. Holly looked up at him and pointed at the screen.

“Mister Rogers,” she said.

Mike raised his eyebrows, turning to see Mister Rogers on the screen with Daniel Tiger, light music playing behind them as they talk softly to one another. Mike nodded.

“Mister Rogers is a smart man,” Holly said, kicking her feet back and forth and taking a final, finishing sip from her cup. And Mike settled next to her, barely hearing Karen trot down the steps and pass the archway, stopping in the hall to put back up the Christmas picture with a new frame.

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The cabin had stilled, Hopper leaning back into his chair, brushing his mustache once before resting his hands on his legs. Eleven had trailed to the couch, and Nancy had sat down next to her on the floor, her legs crossed and her head leaning on her arm. Richie’s hands were firmly clasped together, his hair hanging in front of his

face. Shifting in his seat, Richie looked up to connect his eyes with Hoppers. Hopper stared back. Richie pushed up his glasses.

“That is a lot to unpack,” Richie said.

Hopper nodded. “It’s a lot to deal with, kiddo. Christ, sometimes I don’t believe that it all happened.”

“No, not the monsters and shit. I totally believe all that,” Richie responded, raising his hands to run his fingers through his hair. “What I really don’t understand,” he turned to look at Eleven, “is you.” Eleven stiffened, her back straight. She tugged at her shirt, brushed her hair out of her eyes. Richie scratched his nose.

“I mean, Mike is your boyfriend? We’re talking about the same Mike, right?” Eleven furrowed her brow as Nancy hid her growing smile in her arm. “Listen, Eleven, you are a super powerful freak-of-nature woman. Mike?” Richie shook his head, “Mike is just a goofy dumbass.” Eleven jutted out her chin.

“Mike is nice,” she responded. Richie shrugged, holding his hands out in front of him.

“Hey kid, it seems like you know him better than I do.” Richie chuckled to himself before his eyes went wide, a grin splitting his face. “Wait, are you the one Mike was having phone sex with on the walkie talkie?” The simultaneous reactions bombarded the room. Nancy let out a loud laugh into her hands, Hopper bolted to stand, and Eleven’s face twisted into confusion.

“The kid was doing WHAT?” Hopper yelled while Eleven looked between Richie’s laughing grin and Hopper’s fuming grimace.

“You’ve done it now, Rich,” Nancy said, her face stifling a smirk.

“Wait, what is phone sex?” Eleven asked, her eyes saucers. Hopper was wiping his face with both hands, visibly shaking.

“I am going to kill that kid,” Hopper said into his hands. Eleven stood as well, clenching her fists.

“Don’t hurt Mike,” she said.

“Christ, Elle,” Hopper said again, running his hands through his hair. Eleven looked at him challengingly, and Richie gave out one more laugh before chiming in.

“Hey-hey I have an actual question,” he said, raising his hand like he was sitting in a classroom. Hopper huffed and took his hands away from his face, his lips firmly pressed together. “Can you show me how you move stuff? With your mind?” Richie said to Eleven.

The room went quiet, and Eleven turned to connect her eyes with Richie, nodding. Richie’s mouth twitched before he forced another smile on his face. She swatted her hair out of her face again like she wasn’t used to it being so long. Richie shifted to the edge of his seat.

“What about those beer cans? Can you use the force on them?” Richie pointed to the side table where Hopper’s cans sat, empty. Richie smiled up at Eleven and she turned to stare at them, her head tilting down just a little, her eyes intently focused. Richie followed her gaze and startled at the sight of the two cans suspended in the air. They floated over to the middle of the group before halting. Eleven then crushed them and shot them into the garbage can in the kitchen. They landed with a loud thunk, and Richie whipped around to watch, his face frozen. His eyes were wide, his hands grasped tightly on the cloth couch. He turned back to look at Eleven, and she looked back at him, rubbing her nose, a tiny smudge of blood transferring onto the pad of her thumb.

“Holy shit,” Richie said. There was a beat of silence after as Richie’s wide eyes stared at Eleven. She shifted under his gaze. “That was the coolest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. You’re a fucking amazing.” Eleven moved her weight between her feet, a small smile turning the corners of her mouth. “So you can move shit and find people? How do you find people?”

Eleven walked and sat down next to Richie, folding her hands on her lap. “I find them in my head.” She pointed at her temple. “If I know what they look like, then I can find them.”

“Holy fucking shit,” Richie said, Hopper shaking his head at him. “All you need is a picture of someone and you can find them?” Eleven nodded. “You are like the world’s greatest spy, kiddo.” She pursed

her lips, her eyebrows turning for a moment before settling back on her face. Hopper sat back down, nervously brushing his mustache again. He and Nancy shared a quick glance as Richie's eyes went wide.

"Hold on—fuck—wait," he mumbled, reaching into his back pocket. Nancy raised an eyebrow at him as he whipped out the picture of his friends he had shoved in his pocket earlier. Richie stared at the picture for a moment, his eyes excited, and then he shoved the picture in Eleven's face. "Can you find my friends?"

Eleven's eyes went crossed for a moment before she gingerly took the picture out of Richie's hands. Puling it back, she was able to focus on the image of the group of boys, some crying, others forcing smiles. Eleven looked up at Richie to see his face bright, his smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

"Which one?"

Richie leaned over to look at the picture, his eyes darting on the faces for a split second before settling. He pointed at the boy who was clutching at his clothes, tear tracks staining his face. Richie looked at Eleven and she looked back.

"Can you find my Eddie?"

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Quicksand

I have been thinking about Mister Rogers a lot lately for some reason. I watched him when I was younger and I remember when he passed and how my mom and I both cried when we watched PBS after that. But i was also really little when I watched him, so I don't remember his show quite as much as sesame street and the like. But it is the sweetest, kindest program ever and children should still watch it. the line that Holly said is from an episode where he talks about adoption :')

Also I was going to put the part with Eddie in this chapter, but it was getting long, so I cut myself off. Hopefully it won't be too long until I update again, but inktober is coming, and I will be shifting into art mode for a while. (I will insert a shameless instagram plug once inktober is over, if anyone cares to look at my sad attempts at art)

But yeah. I WILL TRY AND UPDATE AGAIN SOON
BUT IT MIGHT BE A LITTLE BE CAUSE ART

32. Chapter Thirty-Two: Love will clean your mind and makes you free

Notes for the Chapter:

I RETURN BEFORE INKTOBER IS DONE LOOK AT THIS

i was half way done with this chapter last week but then got a stupid cold. almost recovered now, so here's another chapter! This one has two things I've been WAITING to write foreveeeeer and I hope you like how they came out

As always, super unbetad like oops i'll fix any mistakes later

“No, you’re not doing that,” Hopper said, stepping toward Richie and Eleven. They both whipped their heads to him, Eleven with her brow furrowed fiercely. Richie narrowed his eyes.

“Why the fuck not?” he asked and Eleven held the photo close to her. Hopper shook his head. Hopper stepped closer again but Eleven pressed the photo to her chest, looking at Hopper through her eyebrows. Shaking his head, Hopper stood firm.

“I don’t want you searching for anyone else who could sense you,” he waved his hand toward Richie, “like this kid. It’s too dangerous.” Richie scoffed, crossing his arms.

“What the fuck do you think Eddie is going to do—call the fucking police?” Richie mimed a phone call, putting his hand up to his ear. “Oh hello officer, sorry to bother you but I sensed a teenager in my room today—no she wasn’t actually there, I just *felt* her.” Richie rolled his eyes, crossing his arms again. “Besides, I already told him that I was talking to someone I couldn’t see.”

Hopper wiped his brow before pinching his nose, “You,” he paused, “you told him?” Behind him Nancy shifted in her stance, her eyes darting around, obviously worried. “You told him over the phone?”

Richie shrugged.

“Yeah, I told him. He already knows.” Eleven stepped closer to Richie, still keeping the photo close. She looked at Hopper again, her eyes almost pleading, and yet forceful. Like she was asking for approval, but would do it anyway. Hopper sighed, rubbing his hand down his face before letting it fall at his side. He shook his head.

“I don’t like it. Eleven.” She raised her chin at him. “You get out of there the second you get uncomfortable—I don’t care what this kid is saying.” He waved his arm at Richie, and he rolled his eyes again. “You don’t like it, then you get right out, alright?” Eleven nodded at him, and Hopper sighed again.

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Eddie had just started drying the dishes when something prickled up his spine. It was subtle, slight, but he felt his hands halt and his body straighten. Whipping his body around, he stared around the kitchen, searching for whatever had entered the room. Sometimes when he left his window open for Richie to crawl into his room late at night, his neighbor’s cat would sneak inside. He had gotten into the habit of keeping his window slightly open at night even after Richie left, and twice since his departure Eddie had come home to the cat sleeping on his bed. But today there was no tail turning down hallways or jumping off of his countertop. Darting his eyes, Eddie felt his hands tense around the towel.

“Hello?” he called into the empty house. And then he felt the feeling return, lightly waving toward him through the air. Eddie’s breath sped up as he focused on the spot that the feeling originated from, staring at the blank air. It didn’t look different, and yet he knew that something was there, looking right at him. He shivered, his knuckles turning white.

“What’s going on—where are you,” he said, his hands shaking around the cloth. And when a response arrived, his body tensed so much that his bones felt sore. But the feeling was not the same as before, not the skin prickling presence but a clear answer. And his spine relaxed at the feeling of childish giggles and warm hands enveloped his senses. Squeezing his eyes shut, Eddie allowed the feeling to seep through his

skin, softening around his cheeks like a hand brushing past. A gentle brush. Then Eddie opened his eyes, remembering his phone call the other day. About a girl like them. Eddie furrowed his brow, eyes darting around until they again settled on the empty spot once again.

“Are you with Richie?”

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“Yes,” Eleven responded, and Richie studied her blank expression, noting the beginnings of blood dripping from her nose. “I’m with Richie.” She was seated on the floor with her blindfold securely tied, the TV turned toward white noise as they group stayed around her. Hopper was leaning against the wall, Nancy sitting on the couch but leaning forward. Richie was seated right across from Eleven, and he scooted forward when she said his name.

“What is he doing?” Richie whispered to her.

“Dishes,” she said back, but Richie felt how far away she was. It was like she was here but also there, her body remaining but part of her floating outside, watching. Richie hugged his knees.

“He is safe,” Eleven said, and Richie hid his smile in the crook of his arm. Obviously Eddie asked if Richie was alright. Nancy clasped her hands together and Hopper huffed in the corner, drumming his fingers against his arm.

“Hey, hey Eleven. Ask him how his mom has been without me there to keep her company,” Richie giggled through the request, and Hopper and Nancy both rolled their eyes, Nancy at least with a smile.

“How is your mom without Richie?” Eleven asked. She paused for a while, licking her lip for a moment. “He said ‘fuck you’.” Hopper stiffened, clenching his fingers on his bicep. Nancy laughed into her hand while Richie let out a loud, throaty laugh. He hid his face again, this time in his elbow. He rubbed his head against his arm for a moment before resting his chin on his knee. Scooting closer, Richie spoke again, his voice surprisingly soft. Almost sweet. Nancy sat straight, her clasped hands tightening as Richie said, “Tell Eddie I love him.”

“Richie loves you,” Eleven said without pause, and Hopper dropped his arms, his eyes widening slightly before they darted to connect with Nancy’s surprised face. She turned to connect her gaze with Hopper, her mouth gaping for a moment before she shut it, pursing her lips. A wet sniff shifted their focus, and both Nancy and Hopper looked to see blood dripping down Eleven’s face. “He loves you, too.” Richie’s face split into a wide, toothy smile, and he pressed his grin into his arm again. Turning her head, Nancy studied his expression. The light in his eyes. He inched closer again, leaning close to Eleven and reaching out his hand to rest on her leg.

“Eleven, tell him that—,” he said before his eyes went wide and blank. Then blood gushed from his nose, flowing out over his mouth and dripping down his neck. Eleven gasped, flinching away from him and ripping her bandana off.

Hopper rushed them first, pushing Richie further away from Eleven’s retreating form. Nancy grasped Richie’s shirt, tugging his stiff body away. Eleven was gasping, her breath short and her eyes wide and staring. When Nancy jerked Richie, he fell back, hands clasped around his nose. Blood seeped through his fingers, dripping down the back of his hand. “Shit—shit,” Hopper mumbled, and Eleven, eyes still wide, shoved her bandana in Hopper’s hands. He handed it to Nancy, and she passed it to Richie. He pressed it against his nose.

“What the hell just happened?” Hopper yelled, whipping his face between Richie and Eleven. They sat still, gaping expressions.

“He was there,” Eleven whispered the same time Richie yelled, “What the fuck was that.” Her eyes shifted to Hopper’s, and she gulped, smudging the single drip of blood drying to her upper lip.

Scrambling out of Nancy’s hands, Richie crawled toward Eleven, stopping a foot in front of her. “Holy fucking shit—the fuck—,” he mumbled, blood still trickling out of his nose. “What just—what the fuck was that?”

Eleven stared at him, her eyes unblinking. “You were there,” she whispered again, shifting away. “How?” Richie shook his head, dripping blood on the ground.

“Where was I?” Richie reached out again, and Eleven shuffled further away.

“DON’T TOUCH HER,” Hopper yelled, shoving Richie away. Nancy yanked Hopper’s hand away, dragging Richie back into her side. Nancy pressed the bandana back to his face. Richie was talking into the bandana, his voice muffled and his shoulder’s trembling. In that moment the room was silent. Only Eleven’s harsh breaths inhaling and exhaling broke the silence. Richie coughed into the bandana, raising it from his face to reveal a red stained face. He looked up to Nancy, and she swore under her breath.

“Jesus, Rich—you’re covered,” she gestured to his shirt that was painted in red. Richie sniffed, a small stream of blood still steadily flowing from his nose. “Hopper,” Nancy said, “do you have anything he can borrow? My mom is going to flip if she sees this.” Hopper huffed, turning back to Eleven, his hand resting on her shoulder. They stared at each other, silently conversing, before he stood and turned into his room. Nancy clenched her hand on Richie’s shoulder.

“Richie—what the fuck just happened?” she whispered. Eleven sat still, waiting for an answer, her breaths having calmed down. Richie looked up at Nancy, a small drop of blood beaded on his glasses, and removed the bandana to speak.

“It was like—fuck—it was so fucking dark and empty except for Eleven. And,” he paused, “I think I saw Eddie? Just for a second,” he furrowed his brow, licking his lips, only to cringe at the taste of his own blood.

“He was there,” Eleven interrupted. “Where I find people,” her voice was wavering, nervous. Clenching her fists, Eleven took a breath and inched forward, reaching out her own hand to Richie. He flinched back. Hopper opened his door, holding up an old, oversized polo shirt and tossing it at Richie. He caught it and held it up, furrowing his brow and looking back up at Hopper.

“I don’t care if it’s not all the rage or whatever—wear the shirt.” Nancy dragged Richie to stand and pushed him away from the group so he could change. He handed her the blood covered bandana and his glasses and ripped off his shirt, throwing on the gray polo, letting

it drape over his gangly limbs. Taking back the bandana, he pressed it back to his nose, looking at Nancy. They shared a moment of silence, and she pursed her lips, fidgeting her fingers before tugging him into a quick, split second hug. Richie, wide eyed, stared at her when she pulled away.

“Don’t fucking scare me like that, you asshole.”

Richie laughed into his bandana, shrugging his shoulders.

“You better not.”

He rolled his eyes. “What are you—Auntie Karen?”

Nancy shoved him, and he let out a light laugh into the cloth. Unfolding his glasses, Nancy placed him back on his face, and he scrunched his nose before pushing them up with his unoccupied hand. Glancing at her watch, Nancy furrowed her brow before looking back up at Richie. “We need to get going. We should soak this shirt in the bathroom upstairs.” Richie nodded.

“Probably shouldn’t let Auntie find this,” he lifted the shirt up, the once green color now splattered with dark red, resembling the colors of Christmas. They turned back to see Hopper and Eleven having a hushed conversation before they glanced back at Nancy and Richie. The group stood silent, letting a moment pass before Nancy spoke.

“We need to leave.” Hopper nodded at her, but Eleven rushed forward.

“Come back soon,” she said, staring at Richie, but still standing a foot away, her fingers fidgeting and her stance shifting. Richie nodded at her.

“I’ll need to bring back your bandana anyway,” he said, giving her a stained smirk that was only slightly strained. She smiled at him before turning back to Hopper. Another beat of silence passed before Nancy and Hopper nodded at each other before Nancy and Richie inched to the door. Richie turned back to waive at Eleven, and the girl again shifted her weight before she waived her back.

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It was silent in the car, Nancy's fingers firm on the steering wheel and Richie's hand still pressed to his nose. Nancy's eyes darted to him quickly, and Richie pretended not to notice. Removing the bandana from his nose, Richie sniffed, brushing under his nose. The bleeding had stopped, and he placed the bandana on his lap and leaned to look out the window. Nancy drummed her fingers on the wheel.

"So you just like," she paused, "went in her head?"

Richie shrugged, "I guess? I don't know. It was so fast—just," he waived his hands around, "I saw what she was seeing? I think." He shrugged again, leaning his head on the cool glass.

Nancy paused, "And you saw Eddie?" Richie nodded, turning to look at her. Nancy's fingers drummed again, and she pursed her lips. "Richie," she said, and he shifted to look at her. Her shoulders were stiff, her eyes still staring out to the road. Richie hunched his back, looking away from Nancy. Shutting his eyes, he took a breath, waiting for her to continue.

"Is Eddie," she paused. Richie interrupted.

"Eddie is my boyfriend." He looked at her fully. "I'm gay."

Nancy nodded, clenching her hands on the steering wheel as they turned to another street. She bit her lip, drumming her fingers once more before turning to pull off the road. Richie stiffened as she put the car in park and sat back in her seat. She shifted, turning to look at him for a second before looking back out the window.

Nancy asked, "Does mom know?" Richie shook his head no, and Nancy nodded in response. Then she sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Sorry—Jesus Christ." She looked at Richie, "Sorry I've just—I've never met a gay person before." Richie snorted.

"Nancy," he raised an eyebrow. "These are the suburbs. Like—the friggin back woods suburbs." Nancy shrugged at him and he continued, "We're here. We're all over the place—what else is there to get up to out here but wild gay sex?" He let out a shallow laugh before sniffing again, rubbing his nose. "We're just fucking hiding." Nancy sat with fidgeting fingers, her foot twitching lightly. Richie felt

his own hands start to clench around the blood soaked bandana, and he shifted in his seat. “You got any questions or anything?” Nancy looked back at him, their eyes connecting for the first time during the car ride. She stared at him, pursing her lips once again before asking a question.

“What is a twink?”

Richie’s eyes went wide before he doubled over in laughter, clutching his sides and rocking back and forth as Nancy’s face went red. “Stop fucking laughing—even Jonathan knows what it is—I want to know!” Richie just laughed harder, his body shaking and tears prickling at the corner of his eyes. Soon, Nancy was joining him, a smile breaking on her face and her own exasperated laughs falling from her mouth. Suddenly she shouted, “Oh shit.”

“What—what is it,” Richie asked in between giggles.

“Donna Mae.”

“What about Donna Mae?”

Nancy put her hand on her forehead, more laughs falling from her mouth. “She asked me to set you guys up today.” She watched Richie start to laugh again, his head slamming back into his headrest. “She practically begged me—what am I going to say?”

Richie was gasping, his hands clutching his heart as he let out silent laughs, his mouth wide and splitting. Nancy pressed her head down on the steering wheel, her shoulders shaking in laughter until she accidentally set off the car horn with the weight of her head. They both jumped back, silent for a second before loud, roaring laughter escaped them. And for a moment, they both just sat, their laughter dwindling but smiles still remaining on their faces as Nancy put the car back into drive and drove back on the road.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Fill your heart

I've been wanting to write Richie and Eleven talking to Eddie for so loooong. I am glad I was finally able

to get to it.

AND the part with Nancy was not something I was originally going to have, but as Nancy developed more in this story, I wanted her to know about Eddie and Richie. I hope you guys enjoyed this little coming out scene <3

Also super random but like. do not ever thing about grown up Richie and Eddie dancing in their apartment in NYC to Taylor Swift's song "Lover" cause like. You will cry. Cause i cry.

also also does anyone? Want to see the intober stuff I've done so far? cause I'm actually like super proud of what i've done so far like I like how they've all come out so far how weird.

33. Chapter Thirty-Three: It's got nothing to do with you

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally we're starting to get into all the stuff I was waiting foooooor. It feels like its been forever. (I mean it has actually been two years like hole crap. I really should try and get like a chapter in a week rather than this sporadic updating.) I feel like i've been saying that for the past few months tho but its true like I had all this build up and now I feel like I'm actually getting somewhere.

I just got back from my family vacation in ME and it was so nice and I did so much kayaking and i feel one with nature like a friggin tree spirit

When Nancy and Richie walked into the house, they were giggling, fumbling over their words and themselves. Both Holly and Mike flinched at the sudden noise, and Mike rolled his eyes as the pair continued to loudly interrupt the television. Nancy tripped over her own feet as she stepped inside, and Richie caught her arm before she stumbled into the wall. There was a beat of silence before their laughter tumbled out again, Nancy clutching Richie's arm as she rocked back and forth, eventually leaning her head against his shoulder for a moment. They ignored the groan from Mike in the other room.

"Get it together, Nancy," she said to herself, and Richie patted her head.

"It's too late—you've already fallen apart," he responded, and she shoved his shoulder back, and he gasped in false shock, his hands pressed against his heart. "Rude," he said, "So very rude." He brushed an imaginary tear out of his eyes. Behind them, Karen peaked through the doorway, a smile crinkling her eyes.

"Looks like the two of you had fun," she said, and Richie and Nancy stood straight, Richie shoving his hands behind his back, his arms

still full of a bloodied T-shirt and bandana. He pushed his shoulders back, straightening his neck.

“Ah yes, we had a splendid time, did we not?” he said with a posh British accent. “Hmm, yes young Nancy?” he leaned toward Nancy, his back still stiff. She pushed his back again.

“Get out of my face, Richie,” Nancy answered, shaking her head at him. “We had a nice time, Mom,” she said, looking back at her mother who was still standing with a gentle smile on her face. Karen nodded.

“I’m glad,” Karen said. “Go ahead and wash up—the spaghetti will be ready soon.” She turned to leave before halting and turning back. “Oh Richie, your friend called. A couple times, actually.” Richie raised an eyebrow. “Eddie? I believe. He wanted to talk to you about something.” Karen gave a small laugh, “Quite adamantly.” Richie maintained his smile, but Nancy noted the slight shift in his stance. His shoulders stiffened for a moment before he gave her mother a wide grin.

“You’re telling me I get to talk to my Spaghetti and eat it, too?” Richie feigned happy crying, and Nancy joined him in fanning his fake tears. Karen shook her head at them before returning to the kitchen, leaving them to quickly switch their faces from giddy to concern. Neither of them noticed Mike perking his ears at the sudden silence. He shifted in his seat, peering at them still standing in the doorway with his eyebrows furrowed. Nancy spoke first, her voice hushed.

“It’s about earlier,” she said, and Richie nodded.

“For sure.”

“Here, give me those and call him really quick—I’ll start soaking them in the sink.” She took the blood soaked garments from Richie, her face unmoving at touching the dirtied cloth. Nancy turned to head up the steps before stopping. “Tell me what Eddie saw,” she said, and Richie nodded again before sniffing once and heading to the phone. He tugged at the oversized shirt he was still wearing before pulling out the chair tucked into the reading nook and picking up the

receiver. He was about to key in Eddie's phone number when Mike interrupted.

"He called like a million times." He stood with his hands in his pockets, shifting on his feet. Richie squinted.

"Um okay? So?" Mike rolled his eyes.

"What's his problem?"

Richie stared at him for a moment before gesturing at the phone. "How should I know? That's why I'm going to call him?" He tapped at the counter, watching Mike's face stiffen, his eyes darting behind Richie and then back to him. Richie followed his gaze to a Christmas portrait of the family hanging on the wall. The one he had shattered. Richie glared at Mike.

"What, are you feeling sorry for me or something?"

Mike crossed his arms, shifting his weight. "Why would I do that?"

"Kid—go away. You're a little shit and I don't want your fucking pity," Richie whispered, his hands clenched. Mike darted his eyes away again before staring back at Richie, pursing his lips and turning away. He flopped back on the couch next to Holly, still eyeing Richie. He watched as Richie rolled his eyes and dialed the phone.

It rang once before it was answered with a hasty, "Hello?"

"I hear you called a million times?" Richie said, trying and failing to stop a smile from spreading across his face. Eddie's gasp was stopped by the rush of words coming from his mouth.

"Holy shit Richie I talked to the girl you were talking about and she was talking to me and it was like when we went to the lighthouse except it also wasn't because she wasn't dead and I could tell she wasn't dead but it still felt similar." He said all of this on one single exhale before taking another exaggerated breath in and continuing, "But then it felt different for a second like when you're here making stupid jokes and tugging at my sleeve and everything happened so quickly but I swear it was like you were standing so close—."

“Eddie—.”

“—and then it all ended at the same time and it was gone and then my mom walked into the room and I was trying not to freak out so I said I was talking to a cat and—.”

“Holy fucking shit, Eds—take a breath,” Richie said, and he stopped for a second, listening to the words flooding out of Eddie’s mouth before stopping him again. “Eddie, you need to stop—let me—holy fuck Eds, love,” Richie insisted, “Eddie, take a breath.” Stopping his words, Eddie grunted at him before taking a loud breath so Richie could hear. “You alright? Did you mom freak out about the cat?”

Eddie huffed. “She made me vacuum all the carpets and is closing all the windows upstairs.” Richie laughed and nodded, opening his mouth to speak but Eddie interrupted. “Richie, what is going on? Please.” Richie pursed his lips. He could hear the worry in Eddie’s voice—the waiving vocals and hushed tone. Richie sniffed, rubbing his neck and peering into the living room. Mike and Holly both looked toward the television, Mike resting his chin on his hand and seemingly ignoring Richie like he wanted. Leaning on the tabletop, Richie put his hand around his mouth.

“Don’t freak out.”

“Christ—fuck you Richie—you know that doesn’t help me not freak out.”

“Just,” he paused, looking back at Mike, “I can’t say it all right now.” He rubbed his forehead. “I’ll write you guys another letter and explain—.”

“Richie—we’ve all been fucking messed up about this. Last night Stan called me asking if I was feeling how scared you were.” Richie clenched his hand on the phone. “Bill was at his house saying the same thing. It felt so fucking cold and you just—,” Eddie’s voice started to pick up in volume. “I just talked to some girl and then suddenly you were there, too and that doesn’t make any sense so you fucking explain right fucking now or I’m hanging up the phone.”

Richie quickly said, “Christ—don’t hang up Eddie. Just gimme a

second.” Eddie huffed again, and Richie could picture his crossed arms and cute angry face. He tried not to smile at the thought. “Okay Eddie, so I met the girl. Like in person.”

“Okay,” Eddie answered.

“And she can do more than we can—she can move shit with her mind.”

“That’s fucking impossible,” Eddie said.

Richie shrugged, “Yeah, well so are ghosts and demon clowns and monsters.” Eddie paused on the other line, waiting for Richie to continue. So Richie took a deep breath.

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“So she can move shit with her mind?” the line from Derry, Maine said.

“And can find people with just a picture—that’s how she was talking to me,” the Hawkins line responded.

“Okay, okay—but how the fuck did I feel you in my house?” Derry said. The woman sniffed at the language the teenagers were using. She adjusted her headset, taking a sip of her coffee and gingerly placing back down on the table, the low lighting making her squint.

“She was talking to you first but then I like—I touched her leg and then I was in her head, too,” Hawkins said. The woman furrowed her brow, noting the time of the phone call. The two separate locations and the date of recording. She tapped quickly on her pager.

“Holy shit,” Derry responded. *“Holy fucking shit Richie—that’s. That’s terrifying.”*

“Yeah no shit—my nose started bleeding like a fucking period,” Hawkins said. The woman scrunched her face.

“Don’t be gross,” Derry replied.

“Hey—you like it when I’m gross.”

“Wrong. I like you—not when you’re gross.”

“Aw, you like me?”

“Richie shut the fuck up and get back on topic—she’s a shiner?” The woman grabbed a pen, noted the time on the recording and quickly wrote on her notepad

SHINER?

“Sort of—I guess? But she’s not a natural,” Hawkins said. Eyes widening, the woman underlined SHINER once before writing NATURAL right next to it. She buzzed her pager again. *“But I can’t talk about everything right now—I’m going to write you guys another letter. The girl’s dad got kind of pissy when I said that I’d told someone about her.”*

“Okay okay, but you better fucking send that letter like tomorrow.”

“Eds my love, I’ll write it out tonight,” Hawkins said, and the woman tapped the desk, her eyes darting around the time stamps and her notes.

“Don’t fucking call me Eds,” Derry said. Finally the woman’s pager went off, and she looked down to read the name of the responder. She quickly typed a message.

“Oh Eddie—um, I told Nancy about us,” Hawkins said. The Derry line gave a small gasp.

“You did?”

“Yeah—she’s good.”

Derry responded, *“You trust her.”* The Hawkins line laughed.

“More than I thought I would.” A pause lingered over the line before Hawkins said with a cheery voice, *“Well, I need to go talk to Nancy actually—she’s cleaning my bloody shirt, so Eddie my love, alas, I must depart.”*

“Wait—bloody shirt? What did you do to yourself?”

"All will be explained in my letter, love, but I—."

"Richie, I swear to God if you don't—."

"Eddie, I'll tell you—I promise. I love you."

Derry sighed. *"I love you too you fucking asshole."*

"There it is. Bye love."

"Bye." Hawkins disconnected the line.

Shoving her chair back, the woman stood and trotted to the wall mounted phone, ripping it off the receiver and tapping in the number given on her pager. The few other colleagues in the dark room eyed her, their own eavesdropped conversations drifting into the background. The phone rang only once before it was picked up, and the woman clenched her hand around the plastic of the receiver.

"Get me the office of Dr. Sam Owens."

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Up the Hill Backwards

OH MAN OH MAN whats going on oh man who knows (I do) who could guess that this was gonna happen (I did)

ALso for everyone who said that they would wanted to see my inktober so far, its all on my personal instagram @catmogrady. I would just ask that if anyone feels compelled to comment, that they wouldn't talk about this fic. This is quite a lil gay fic and I ain't out to the fam and they all follow me so I would appreciate it a lot!

BUT BUT yeah lots going to be happening soon and I am excited to write it!

34. Chapter Thirty-four: It's a brand new day

Notes for the Chapter:

oops sorry for the gap in updates. And sorry that nothing really?? Happens?? in this update

Oops.

But in my defense, i was doing inktober and then got super sick but still worked at my job which transferred me to a different bank and then i got robbed at said bank.

A lot of life stuff has happened. and it is SNOWING NOW like i'm gonna get 18 inches where i live right now like holy moly

but again so sorry so very sorry. didn't read over this before posting so I'll read it again tomorrow and fix any mistakes

When Richie hung up the phone, Mike watched him retreat up the stairs, his feet trotting lightly until he reached the top. Mike furrowed his brow, his crossed arms squeezing tighter. His phone conversation was hushed and quick, and despite his ears pricked in curiosity, he was unable to hear what Richie was discussing. Holly on Mike's right shifted in her seat, her eyes drooping. She forced them open to keep her sights on the television, but her strength only lasted a few moments, and soon they were drifting again, falling closed like a feather casually landing on the ground.

"Mike," Karen called from the kitchen. Pushing himself to stand, Mike walked to the kitchen where Karen was draining pasta in the sink. "Do you mind setting the table for me?" Mike sighed, fighting a roll of his eyes as he walked to the cabinet and grabbed a stack of plates. He made his way to the dining room with his arms full and paused by each chair to place the pristine porcelain plates around the table. Karen was behind him with a pot full of pasta sauce. She passed Mike on his left, reaching to the center of the table and gently

placed the pot down on a cloth. Stepping back, she allowed Mike to cross in front of her and put down the last plate. He turned to her, pursing his lips and stepping to leave when Karen spoke.

“Mike.” She paused, closing her eyes for a breath before continuing. “I know that you and Richie don’t—don’t get along very well.” Mike stayed quiet as she looked him in the eye. “But I am very grateful that you have been giving him space.” Mike stood stiff, eyes darting awkwardly around. Karen smiled at him, her face gentle and calm. “You are the one who gave up the most with him coming to live here. It hasn’t been easy for you.” Mike shrugged. Karen stepped close to him, placing a hand on his arm. “Thank you.”

Karen walked passed him, leaving him standing still in the dining room, his hands clenched at his sides. Shifting in his stance, he joined her in the kitchen, opening a drawer to retrieve some utensils. Karen stopped him before he turned to leave the kitchen. “Here—I’ll take care of that. Can you tell Nancy and Richie that dinner is ready?” Sighing, Mike nodded and walked to the stairs.

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“I’m all done with the phone,” Richie announced as he swung into Nancy’s bedroom, holding onto the door knob and draping himself into her space. He was greeted by no one, the room empty, and Richie pursed his lips.

“Move, Rich,” Nancy said behind him, and he stepped aside as she walked into the room and sat down on the bed. “The bandana and your shirt is soaking in the tub.” She collapsed onto the mattress, her hands on her face. “It’s totally covered.”

Richie stepped to her and followed her lead, flopping back on the bed next to her. He sniffed, rubbing his sore nose. Nancy turned to watch him rub his face, his fingers getting dangerously close to his nearly healed stitches.

Nancy furrowed her brow. “How many frigging injuries do you have right now?” Richie laughed and shrugged.

“I never really bothered to keep count.”

Nancy snorted, “Maybe you just can’t count that high.”

Richie sat up, his hand covering his heart. “Again, Nancy over here with the insults.” He whimpered, “I think I need to speak with your mother about this terrible behavior.” Nancy rolled her eyes with a smile. “Children these days have no sense of propriety.” He feigned fainting, the back of his hand brushing his forehead. Richie draped himself on top of Nancy, and she shoved him off as best as she could, a smile struggling to split her face open.

“God Richie—you’re fucking heavy—get off.” He giggled as he rolled away, resting his hands folded on his chest. “How was Eddie?” Richie took in a deep breath, his eyes lightly softening on the edges. Nancy noticed how this was a common occurrence when anyone mentioned Eddie. She shook her head at herself for not seeing the signs earlier.

“He was obviously freaked,” Richie answered. “And he operates on freaked, so he was like,” he paused, his hands waving, “stupid freaked.” Nancy nodded and he continued. “I couldn’t tell him everything and that fucking pissed him off, so he made me promise to send him a letter. He said that the others all knew something was up since last night.” Nancy looked at Richie from the side.

“Wait, they all what?”

Richie turned to her, laying on his side and resting his head on his hand. “They all felt when I was in the lab last night.” Nancy closed her eyes and shoved her head further into the cushion of her mattress.

“Christ, Richie—your friends felt that? Just you being next to the fucking lab?” Richie shrugged.

“We’re all connected.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nancy mumbled.

Richie chuckled, “Yeah, its fucking crazy.” A moment of silence passed between the two, and Nancy drummed her fingers against her knuckles, staring up at the popcorn ceiling.

“And I thought this world couldn’t get any weirder.” Richie exhaled a

laugh.

“What’s the weirdest bit—the powers, the alternate dimensions, or the gay cousin?”

Nancy laughed, rolling on her side, “Oh DEFINITELY the gay cousin.”

Richie nodded with his eyes closed, “I knew it.”

“So you and Eddie, though? How long have you two been a thing?” Nancy asked. Smiling, Richie held two fingers out in front of Nancy’s face.

“Two years now,” he answered.

Nancy nodded, impressed. “That’s longer than me and Jonathan.”

“And it’s not nearly enough—I’m tellin’ ya Nance—the day they let us queers marry each other is the day I put a fucking ring on that little guy’s finger.” Nancy crooked an eyebrow at him, and Richie’s smile was unwavering. Excited. It crinkled the corners of his eyes and showed off his teeth.

“You really love him, huh?” Richie’s smile remained as he nodded, his cheeks dusted in pink at the words. Nancy felt her face mimicking his.

“I’m gonna try to talk to him again next time we see Eleven.”

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Mike went up the steps slowly, letting his hand hold the railing and smooth against the wood. The pictures on the wall showed the passage of time, from Nancy’s first official photo shoot with her in a purple floral dress up to a picture of Mike holding Holly for the first time at the hospital, his nine-year-old hands trembling with the fear of dropping the child. Mike sniffed, drumming his fingers against the railing for a moment before continuing up the steps. When he reached the top, he heard muffled voices coming from Nancy’s room. Approaching the door, he stopped, hearing Nancy’s voice switch from gentle laughter into hushed whispers.

“Richie—there is no fucking way you’re doing that again,” she said, and Mike inched closer to the gap in the door.

“What—Nancy I have to,” Richie responded.

“Um—no you fucking don’t. You didn’t see how your nose exploded all over the place.” Mike furrowed his eyebrows.

“Yeah, well you didn’t see what it was like in her head.” He said it with finality, and Mike scrunched his face, confused. “I’m gonna go back in.” He heard Nancy huff and the sound of bedsprings bending.

“You’re not going to listen to me on this, are you?”

“Nancy Wancy—do I listen to anyone?”

“We’re going to have to bring another shirt or something. Have some extra towels ready.”

Mike looked at the door, shaking his head for a moment. He reached his hand towards the doorknob.

“I just want to know why the fuck Eleven’s nose didn’t bleed like mine did.”

Mike stopped, his body stiff, his outstretched hand halting in the air. His eyes went wide, his back cold. Staring at the door, he listened for more conversation, but the words were quiet again. Feeling his body move, he pushed the door.

Nancy and Richie watched him open the door, his hand rigid against cheap wood. The two were sitting on the bed, turned slightly toward each other in their conversation. Richie’s eyebrows lowered at Mike and Nancy quirked a brow at him. Lifting his hand, Mike pointed behind him with his thumb.

“Dinner is ready,” he said, and Richie shot up.

“Yes—its spaghetti time,” he exclaimed, pumping his fists. Grabbing Nancy’s wrist, he brought her to stand, and they toward and past Mike, who stepped to the side to let them pass. He watched as they went down the stairs, his eyes connecting with Nancy’s for a split

second before she descended to the first floor. And Mike's surprise was mixed with something deep and hot inside him. Slowly clenching his fists, Mike trotted down the steps, walking past the dining room to the basement. Rushing, he ran into his room, eyes darting around the room until he spotted his walkie talkie.

Snatching the machine, Mike yanked the antennae up and turned it on to channel 5. "Lucas, do you copy," he said, his voice shaky. He paused, listening to the fuzz of dead air. "Lucas—Lucas do you copy?" Rubbing his face, he waited again. No response.

"Fuck—LUCAS LUCAS LUCAS LUCAS," he repeated until he was interrupted.

"God—what Mike? We just started dinner—."

Gripping the walking tightly, Mike said, "Richie knows about Eleven."

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title song—Shake it

I feel like nancy should know not to talk so openly about Eleven. But i guess Richie isn't as aware of the bad people, is he?

Also again if anyone is at all interested my completed inktober is on my personal instagram @catmogrady. The ask is still the same as last time-- I am a closeted child so pls no mention of my gay fanfic

Author's Note:

Thank you so much for reading! Feedback and critiques are welcome (pls validate me)